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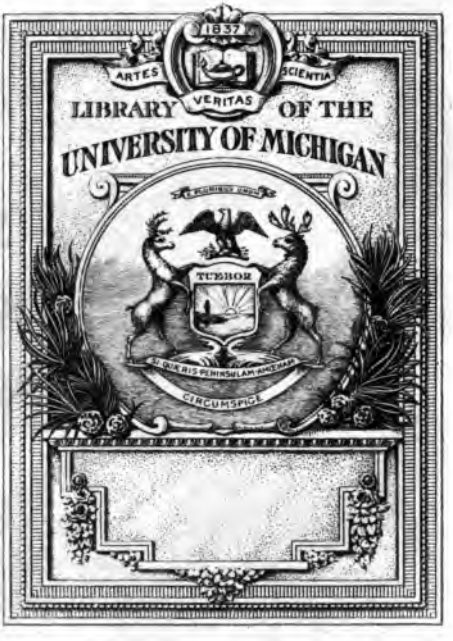
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THE GOSSIP SHOP

By J. E. BUCKROSE

THE MATCHMAKERS
THE ROUND-ABOUT
SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS
GAY MORNING
BECAUSE OF JANE
A BACHELOR'S COMEDY

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

THE GOSSIP SHOP

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE

AUTHOR OF "THE MATCHMAKERS,"

ETC.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE GOSSIP SHOP

THE GOSSIP SHOP

Pauline laughed and came forward from the window. Wheels sounded outside. "Here *is* Chubb!" she said.

"Late again!" called Aunt Dickson, in her strong, pleasant voice.

"Right by church clock . . . wet through . . . wheezin' like a steam engine," bawled Chubb from the doorway. "Shouldn't ha' turned out if it hadn't been for inconveniencing you, 'm."

Instantly, Aunt Dickson's big, red face puckered with concern.

"Come in! Come in!" she called. "Eva, give him a cup of hot tea."

"What'll the ladies say?" asked Chubb.

"Oh, they won't mind," said Aunt Dickson comfortably; for somebody else being kept waiting is so entirely different. "So long as your horse will stand?"

"Stand?" said Chubb. "She'd grow there before she'd move: *I've* trained her."

Then he joined Eva in the kitchen, ordering her rather peremptorily to put more milk in his cup.

"Would you tek me for a fire-eater?" he said.

"I wouldn't tek you for a thousand million pounds," cackled Eva, glad of this opportunity of scoring off an old enemy.

"That isn't funny and it isn't sense," said Chubb. "But one thing I do know: you tried your best to get old Sammy Briggs that hasn't but one arm and——"

Suddenly the electric tortoise-bell whizzed through the house. Pauline came running downstairs and Eva and Chubb hastened out of the kitchen.

"Chubb!" shouted Aunt Dickson. "I heard wheels. I think your horse has bolted."

"Never! I'll tek my oath," panted Chubb, flinging open the front door.

For a moment he stood paralysed, gazing out into the blank and windswept street, then he started to run at an uneven jog-trot pace in the direction of the Ryeford

Road, whence came faint echoes of a four-wheeled cab being driven furiously.

Fifteen ladies looked out from eight narrow, red houses which all had gleaming knockers, white doorsteps, and an air of having behaved always exactly as houses should. The watchers, who wore best dresses which would spoil in such a downpour, compared the room clock with the kitchen clock and both with the chimes from the church spire like so many marionettes moved by a common string, because it is not thought to be very refined to have more than one best dress in Wendlebury, and this cannot, of course, be exposed to unnecessary danger.

But if the intending guests were feeling agitated, that word is too weak to describe the sensations of the Misses Pritchard, who sat among little gleaming card-tables spread with cards and chocolate drops in blue china saucers, and endured tortures of suspense.

"Four o'clock! And they were asked for three-thirty. What *can* have happened?" sighed Miss Amelia.

"I expect you wrote the invitations incorrectly," snapped Miss Harriet. "You are so careless. Remember how you sent a laundry list in mistake for a missionary leaflet to the Vicar. Anything might be done by a person who could make such a mistake as that."

"It was printed on the same kind of paper; and, after all, the laundries *always* abbreviate," replied Miss Amelia, who was ready to cry with disappointment and fatigue, it being no light matter to give a party in Wendlebury, where every householder can bake cakes such as London and Paris and New York chefs *may* compose for the angels when they go to heaven.

Another matter also weighed on the hostesses' minds which they had agreed not to mention, or even to think of, for the duration of the party; but it was this which made them start violently when the door burst open.

"Oh!" they squealed simultaneously. Then on another note: "You, Pauline?"

"Forgive my rushing in like this," said Pauline, "but I came along the moment the rain abated a little; I thought you would be wondering what had happened."

Miss Harriet rose, something with the air of a Mrs. Siddons.

"I knew it! They *would* burn an oil stove in the hall despite my repeated warnings. The Vicarage is on fire at last."

"No, no," said Pauline. "It is only Chubb's cab. Run away. . . . Chubb after it."

"Goodness!" said Miss Amelia.

"Oh, dear!" said Pauline, glancing round at the cards and chocolate drops. "I am so sorry; it is dreadfully disappointing after all your preparations."

"Not at all," said Miss Harriet, drawing herself up. "A little card-party is neither here nor there. A mere bagatelle."

Miss Amelia's lower jaw dropped, then she caught her sister's eye, pursed her lips and agreed hastily—

"Of course . . . a mere bagatelle."

But there was something in it all which touched Pauline, and perhaps may have appealed to the Clerk of the Weather, for he is an official with the capricious uncertainty of an official, but one who also has a love of practical jokes which shows him to be very human. Anyway, he stopped the rain just at that moment, and sent a few rays of pale sunshine dancing down Wendlebury streets. Then eight front doors burst open like flowers at the approach of spring, and fifteen ladies shimmered forth in silk and grenadine and satin merveilleux, picking their way between puddles which reflected every delicate hue of grey and blue and old silver from the February sky above.

As the ladies met outside the Miss Pritchards' house they stood in a group with faces bent forward, talking eagerly, and the gay twitter of question and answer lasted

until they were all safely seated by the little tea-tables, eating yellow queen cakes and drinking tea from beautiful old green-and-white Rockingham china. Continuously through the lively hum of conversation could be heard Miss Amelia's company: "Only fancy that!" and Miss Harriet's "How very interesting!" Every now and then, giving tone to the whole, came the Honourable Mrs. Delamere's important: "As I was saying to my brother-in-law, Lord Southwater"; while the young laughter of the doctor's daughter and of Pauline ran freshly through the talk like the sound of Wendlebury beck through the traffic of market day.

It was clear now that the party had gained an added brilliance from what at first appeared a misfortune, and as Miss Amelia looked round at the little tables she wondered how any one could possibly call Wendlebury a dull place.

CHAPTER II

ON THE RYEFORD ROAD

CHUBB'S cab jolted along the Ryeford Road at such an incredible pace that the sparrows, who knew it well, twittered amazement to each other in the hedgerows, but more surprised still was Chubb's mare, who, like many middle-aged ladies, having got into a fixed groove of thinking she couldn't, was tremendously astonished to find out that she after all could.

She wondered vaguely through her amaze, as she thus cantered along after the fashion of her vanished youth, what on earth had happened to Chubb. Either he was drunk, which seemed improbable because he had long been a strict teetotaler, or he had suffered some violent change of character. It never occurred to her that another man could be on the box, for she was a conservative female and nobody else had occupied that position within her recollection.

Finally, however, she felt herself pulled up near a stone heap, and a voice absolutely unlike Chubb's called out sternly: "Stan' still!" So she moved her head round as far as she could, and fixed a mild, reproachful eye on the owner of the voice, saying without words that she might have known it was not her Chubb.

"Stan' still!" repeated the young man who had been driving. Then he turned to the stone-heap: "She'll stand all right, Delamere, if you think you can get in?"

A tall, thin man in a big overcoat rose with some difficulty, but he managed to give a feeble laugh at the sight of the cab.

"That's never Chubb's cab?" he said. "Lord! Unwin, how the sun stands still in Wendlebury!"

"Yes," said Unwin. "Let me help you. That all right?"

Delamere suppressed a groan and leaned back on the fusty cushions. "Quite right, thanks."

"Now I'll hop on the box and drive as carefully as I can," said Unwin. "Gee-up!" And the mare moved on again, in her usual slow flounder this time, along the quiet road. Delamere at first lay back with closed eyes, but after a while he opened them and looked round at the green fields on either side like an exile seeing home after long years away. The tenderness for what is left. . . . regret for what is gone . . . an aching joy like no other on earth . . . though all men cannot feel this joy, any more than all can feel true love.

The cab stopped before the Green Dragon Inn and Unwin opened the door.

"Here we are, Delamere."

"Hush, man!" said the invalid, glancing quickly round. "I gave my name as Johnson when I came here yesterday. I don't think the family . . . you understand?"

"What rot!" said Unwin, flushing uncomfortably. "That's all forgotten. Mrs. Delamere would be delighted to see you, of course."

"I won't—put her—to the test," gasped Delamere, leaning heavily on Unwin as he got out of the cab.

But ten minutes later he had removed his damp clothes and was established comfortably enough on the sofa by the fireside.

"Morbid idea, wasn't it?" he said with a smile: "this craving to come home to die. I walked too far this afternoon trying to see Wendlebury again with the rain driving across it. . . . You know how it does? That was why you found me in a dead faint on a stone-heap."

"Well, I must own you gave me a turn," said Unwin. "I quite thought you were dying, and when you came

round you would not let me fetch a doctor or anything. All you would say was: 'Get me back to the Green Dragon, somehow.' "

"Well," said Delamere, in his husky voice, "I don't mind telling you now that I thought I was dying too. A man with the remnant of one lung has no business to be wandering about wet roads, of course. It was awfully good of you to do just the one thing that was any use, though how you did it, I don't know. Did you brain Chubb with his own whip and drive on over his prostrate body? But, no, you couldn't. That would have upset the cab, unless Chubb has grown much thinner."

He spoke now rather quickly and his cheeks burned.

"I found the cab standing outside Mrs. Dickson's while Chubb regaled himself inside," said Unwin. Then he paused and continued in a more earnest tone: "Look here, Delamere, this is all nonsense. What's done, *is* done. You have kept out of the way in Australia for years and the whole blessed business is forgotten. Why hide away in this pokey pub as if you'd only come a mucker yesterday? I tell you, life's too short. Mrs. Delamere and Lord Southwater would be awfully grieved if they knew about it."

"My sister-in-law and my estimable brother would be more grieved still if they had to welcome the prodigal home, and duty compelled them to kill the fatted . . . calves' foot jelly." Delamere paused to take breath, and added with decision: "No, Unwin. You found me out by accident. You must respect my secret."

"But some one will certainly recognise you, as I did," argued Unwin.

"I think not. The people of the inn have come here since my day, and I shall be very careful. Besides, you would not have recognised me but for the name on the letter."

"It lay by your side. I thought you were dying. I had to find out what to do with you," apologised Unwin.

"Oh, quite right, of course," said Delamere. "I only wanted to point out that I may easily stay here undetected. As for the letter . . . I suppose you saw it was the last one I ever got from my mother? Poor sort of sentimentality, wasn't it? To read her letter, and look down at her old house, after breaking her heart, eh?"

Unwin turned to the window.

"She'll—she'll be glad if she knows, you know," he blurted out awkwardly at last.

For the first time Delamere's look of cynical weariness changed a little.

"You're a kind chap, Unwin," he said. "If I believed in Providence, I might think He'd sent you to give me a lift over this last stile. But I can't—I've seen too much." He coughed violently, then added in a different tone: "So it's agreed? You keep the secret you chanced to discover while I was lying unconscious?"

"If you put it in that way, I have no alternative," said Unwin gravely. "And now I must be returning Chubb's cab or there'll be a hue-and-cry after it. I stole it from an afternoon party."

"Ah! those parties!" said Delamere. "The cream and the little cakes and the best china . . . all going on just the same. What a blessed sense of permanence it gives one to come back here, Unwin! I s'pose that was what drew me . . . after all the buffeting . . ." He coughed again and held out his hand. "Good-bye. Thank you for all you have done. You'll look me up sometimes?"

"That's all right. Of course I will," said Unwin. "Good-bye!"

Thus the two men parted, covering their emotion with that cloak of light indifference which foreigners find so strange, but which has grown to be a fashion with a certain type of Englishman as inevitable as wearing trousers.

Unwin passed the landlord of the inn in going through the doorway, and the man gave him a rather surprised greeting.

"Driving Chub's cab yourself, sir?"

"Yes. Chubb's busy," said Unwin, with truth, jumping on the box.

"Well, the mare's a good 'un to stand, however," said the landlord, and at this tribute the patient animal flicked her tail gently, as one who murmurs: "You see, even an outsider is forced to do me justice." This attitude impressed Unwin, causing him to remark pleasantly—

"Gee-up, Griselda."

So the cab trundled away down the road, the landlord staring after it. That burst of sunshine which illuminated the streets of Wendlebury shone also on Unwin's blunt, honest features. He whistled as he went, his lithe young figure perched easily in the midst of Chubb's ample seating accommodation; and he noted a jocund air of spring-on-the-way about the fields and hedges. Everything starting afresh, he thought, and a jolly time coming. What a pity human beings couldn't—— Poor Delamere, going out for ever in a roadside pub. . . . But perhaps he wouldn't. . . . Perhaps spring went all through creation and didn't just stop at trees and things. . . .

He changed his tune and whistled meditatively: "John Brown's body is a-mouldering in the grave, But his soul goes marching on." Then he saw Chubb come panting round the next corner.

"Well, Chubb!" he called out agreeably. "Here we are!"

Chubb, out of breath, incommoded by a heavy overcoat and unused to pedestrian exercise, was naturally outraged.

"'Well, Chubb!'" he bellowed. "I'll 'Well, Chubb!' you. Stealing my cab."

"I'm bringing it back. On my soul and honour, I am," said Unwin.

"I should have gone to the police, only I heard my cab turn down this road. I should know the sound anywheres," panted Chubb, catching at the bridle.

Unwin jumped down and patted the mare with affection.

"I don't wonder," he responded cordially. "If Griselda were mine, I should recognise the fall of her fairy feet among a million."

Chubb turned from crimson to purple.

"Fairy feet be condemned!" he said. "I know the mare would never run away by herself."

"You were right to keep your faith in Griselda," said Unwin. "She did not elope. She never would have eloped. She was forcibly abducted."

Chubb replied, but not in terms to be reproduced, that his mare was named Brown Bess. "First you steal my cab . . . then you insult me. . . ." And he concluded that it was a burning shame to treat a man of full habit as he had been "tret."

Unwin saw this now his sense of fun ceased to have the upper hand, and he was seized with compunction.

"I'm awfully sorry, Chubb," he said. "I know it has caused you a lot of bother."

"Then what did you do it for?" said Chubb, beginning to simmer down a little.

"Oh, for—for a joke," said Unwin, seizing on an excuse which Chubb might believe.

"Joking," said Chubb, "has been the ruin of many a better man than you, Mr. Unwin. Should I be looked up to as I am if I joked about the place same as you do? Of course I shouldn't. And them as makes jokes has to pay for them. Heavy, they has to pay."

Unwin felt in his pocket and held out a pound.

"Will that do?"

"I suppose so," said Chubb, taking it and mounting the box. "Now I have to go and fetch all them ladies home. And what am I to say to them, hey? Do you expect I can pass all this off with a joke to *them?*"

"Well, I really should if I were you, Chubb," said Unwin, considering the matter carefully. "Much easier than going into a lot of explanations, you know."

"And what joke should you em-ploy, sir?" said Chubb with heavy irony. "I think I see myself—and Miss Harriet—and Miss Amelia—and Mrs. Delamere—— Oh, I think I see myself *joking.*"

Unwin brought out another pound. He was not a gold mine, but it had to be. "I particularly don't want any one to know that I took the cab, Chubb," he said.

"But what am I to say?" demanded Chubb.

"Why, simply that your mare ran away," said Unwin. "No harm in that!"

At this moment Griselda turned her meek head and blinked once at Chubb. It was enough. The slavish devotion of a lifetime had found its due reward.

"No!" exclaimed Chubb. "That I will not say. Not for no money!"

"But we simply must think of something," urged Unwin. So Chubb thought, breathing hard through his nose. Finally he was delivered of an idea.

"I dessay," he announced, "that I could remark I caught my cab on the Ryeford Road. That's true. And not a word against anybody. And yet it tells nothing."

"Chubb," said Unwin, "why are you not a Prime Minister? That is excellent indeed."

Thus they parted, but at the corner Chubb leaned over the side of the cab, so that his red face shone round the edge of it like a rising sun, and called out wheezily—

"Caught her on the Ryeford Road! Ho! ho! Caught her on the Ryeford Road!"

For he was enjoying the exquisite, primeval flavour of his first joke.

After a time Unwin followed the cab into Wendlebury; and just as he passed the Miss Pritchards' house a little bevy of ladies stepped forth into the pleasant evening. As the young man approached, they all turned to him, smiling and bowing. He thought how charming Pauline Westcott looked in that pale light, and how those ladies in

their best dresses seemed a natural part of the place and hour.

Then he passed on, very pleased with the way in which he had managed the affair of Chubb's cab, but forgetting all about Mrs. Chubb.

CHAPTER III

MRS. CHUBB

MRS. CHUBB was a pale, moon-faced woman with a sharp elbow, very red hands, and an expression resembling that of Griselda; she also had the same attitude towards Chubb.

"Now," she said, handing a steaming plate of tripe and onions to her lord; "how's that?"

He tasted it with the air of a tea-taster sampling a fresh consignment, his wife eyeing him anxiously the while.

"Too salt!" he pronounced.

Mrs. Chubb rubbed her bony hands together triumphantly.

"None in," she said.

"Then," he said, turning upon her, "there ought to be. Whoever heard of anybody cooking tripe without salt? I knew there was something wrong."

"But it eats all right otherways?" she asked. "I tried a bit and it was as tender as chicken."

"You women are always eating," replied Chubb. "A curran' here, a lump o' sugar there—and then saying at meal-times you aren't hungry!"

"Oh, yes, *we* get plenty," said Mrs. Chubb, who certainly did not look over-fed. "Trust us for that. Now, here's the end of cheese toasted up to foller. Tastier-like than cold, isn't it?"

"Sits heavier afterwards," said Chubb. "However, here goes!" And eating with a relish he was unable to conceal, he continued, "My word! You may be thankful

to have a man that sits at home instead of gadding about o' nights like most do."

"I am thankful, Chubb," said Mrs. Chubb fervently. "Here's your pipe, and now I'll poke up the fire."

So he sat down in his armchair; the clock ticked cheerfully; everything which could shine, shone; the purring of the cat mingled with a gentle sound of crockery being washed up at the sink. Mr. Chubb gradually forgave Mrs. Chubb for not having provided him with anything to forgive.

"Look here," he said, holding out two sovereigns on his palm. "What do you think to that, over and above a day's takings, eh?"

Mrs. Chubb stared at the money for a moment without speaking; then she said in a whisper—

"Chubb, you haven't done anything wrong?"

"Did you *ever* know me do anything wrong?" retorted Chubb indignantly.

"No, no, Chubby," deprecated Mrs. Chubb. "But it seems such a lot extra. How did you make it?"

Mr. Chubb began to heave as he had done on the cab at the bend of the Ryeford Road, and his wife's round eyes distended still further.

"Ho! ho!" he laughed, with rather a grinding sound as if the laughter machine were often out of use and needed greasing. "I got it through a clever thing I said."

Mrs. Chubb shook her head: there were limits even with her, and he had reached them.

"No," she said. "You may keep secrets from me if you like, but you won't get me to believe a tale like that."

"It's gospel truth," he said.

"Then what was it?" said Mrs. Chubb.

He stared at her, jingling the money, and then said reluctantly—

"I promised not to tell."

"Telling your wife's not telling," replied Mrs. Chubb.

"I never neard of such a thing. What! Husband and wife are one. The Prayer-book says so."

"Well," said Chubb, "the cab was standing outside Mrs. Dickson's, and it went."

"Went?" said Mrs. Chubb.

"Went," said Mr. Chubb. "No matter how; no matter what for." Then he began to heave again and gasped out: "I caught—ho! ho!—I caught it on the Ryeford Road."

Mrs. Chubb turned a little pale.

"If it wasn't you, Chubb, I should think you'd been drinking. There's nothing clever in that as I can see."

Chubb abruptly ceased heaving and glared at his wife with all the injured ferocity of the brilliant conversationalist snubbed in his own home.

"You wouldn't see," he said bitterly. "No man's own wife ever does. That's at the bottom of a lot——"

"But it *isn't* clever," interposed Mrs. Chubb, weeping. "Nobody could say so but a fool."

"D'you call Mr. Unwin a fool?" Then he clapped his hand before his mouth. "Oh Lord!"

"Mr. Unwin?" exclaimed Mrs. Chubb.

"Forget I mentioned Mr. Unwin," he commanded.

"But I can't," gulped Mrs. Chubb, wiping her eyes. "You must own I do most things you tell me, Chubb, but forgetting and remembering's like being sick. . . . There it is. . . . You can't get no control over it." She paused. "Then Mr. Unwin gave you the money. Was it him that took the cab, then? And whatever for?"

"I never said he did," grunted Chubb.

"Oh!" replied Mrs. Chubb, returning to her crockery in the back kitchen.

The next day was her weekly charing morning at Mrs. Dickson's, and she repaired thither with her round eyes and pale moon-face as expressionless as usual, but with an amount of seething, unsatisfied curiosity inside which appeared likely to explode her corset laces.

At eleven o'clock, she and Eva sat down to cocoa and conversation.

"Queer thing about the cab clear vanishing from before our house yesterday," said Eva. "I hear he caught it on the Ryeford Road—so he told the ladies."

"Aye," said Mrs. Chubb, regarding her jam tart.

"Funny, though," pursued Eva, "that Mr. Chubb should be able to catch even your slow old mare . . . with his figger and all. . . ."

"He's a fine figger of a man," said Mrs. Chubb.

"Well," said Eva, "there's plenty of him!" Then she began to laugh. "Oh dear! Oh dear! You never did see anything so blank in all your life as he looked when he went to the door and there wasn't no cab there."

Mrs. Chubb looked up quickly, holding her tart suspended between her plate and mouth.

"Chubb didn't see it go?"

"No, of course not. He was having a cup of tea in the kitchen."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Chubb. "That's it then."

Eva bent forward eagerly.

"That's what? What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mrs. Chubb, putting her cup and plate together. "Now then, it's the top staircase next, I suppose?"

"You think there was something mysterious about the cab going?" said Eva.

Mrs. Chubb pursed her lips and nodded.

"I do. The mare wouldn't move of herself."

"You think somebody took it?"

She nodded again, having immense enjoyment in taking the superior place from her friend, who usually occupied it.

"But who would do such a silly trick?" said Eva. "Not but what a cousin o' mine stole a handcart for a practical joke and got into a nice mess over it. But he was only thirteen."

"I swore to Chubb I wouldn't tell," said Mrs. Chubb, "and I won't." She took up her dustpan and brush. "Young Mr. Unwin been here lately?" she asked in a casual tone.

"Oh!" shrieked Eva. "It was never him? But what on earth made him do it?"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Chubb. "I never said so. I can't help what you think. You shouldn't think!"

"Us Martins was always beggars to think," Eva replied. "That's what mother said when our Ben brought home a pickle bottle full of tadpoles because she'd been ordered a fish diet; and she never spoke a truer word."

"Well, you can't say I told you," replied Mrs. Chubb; and she went upstairs with dustpan and brush, while Eva carried the eleven o'clock tea-tray into the sitting-room.

Mrs. Dickson, who managed to be a rich woman by the simple expedient of living on half her income and spending the other half on extras, turned to welcome the little meal and hear at the same time any news that Mrs. Chubb might have chanced to relate. She possessed an extraordinary clear, simple nature, and since she could no longer go out into the world, she made the best of all that came into her straight-windowed sitting-room. But her obvious pleasure in any scrap of gossip that would stir the rather stagnant atmosphere of her life caused Eva—and Pauline too, for that matter—to become undeniable newsmongers. So it was with joy that Eva put down the tray and began in the peculiar throaty tone used only for spicy and important items—

"You mustn't breathe a word; but I believe I know who took Chubb's cab."

"Took it?" said Aunt Dickson.

"Yes. Ran away with it." She paused impressively. "Mr. Unwin!"

"Ridiculous!" said Pauline. "Why on earth should Mr. Unwin run away with Chubb's old cab?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, unless he'd had a drop too much," said Eva.

"Really, Eva," said Aunt Dickson sharply. "You must not suggest a thing like that unless you know it to be true."

"No, 'm," said Eva, retreating, rather crestfallen.

But as the door closed on her, the ladies glanced at each other.

"Terrible . . . this Wendlebury gossip," ejaculated Aunt Dickson. "I know few men less likely to drink than young Unwin, though some foolish people might misunderstand his lively manner."

"I don't see how they could," agreed Pauline, "excepting that we are all so dull here that perhaps a really jolly person *might* seem drunk." With which rather acid remark she left the room.

Eva also was feeling irritable because she was quite unused to being snubbed by her mistress, and Mrs. Chubb was not sorry, therefore, when her day's work came to an end.

"Good-bye," sighed the charwoman at the door, bulging bass in hand. "I dessay I shall have a real good cry when I get home."

"What for?" said Eva unsympathetically. "You've had a plum loaf given you, and a jar of dripping, and half a pork pie."

"Oh, no reason," said Mrs. Chubb. "I just feel low in my spirits, that's all. Don't you never know what it is to want a good cry without knowing why you want it?"

"I do," said Eva. "Them's the times when I go and curl my hair and put my beaded shoes on."

Then she banged the door on Mrs. Chubb, who trailed slowly down the street, wondering if Chubb would like the pork pie for his supper.

CHAPTER IV

MISS AMELIA'S GHOST

ELEVENS is a repast not known to everybody because the proper enjoyment of it entails breakfast at eight-thirty and a morning of busy leisure. In Aunt Dickson's house, however, the little meal reached perfection, and it was remarkable how many Wendlebury ladies chanced to pass about eleven o'clock feeling suddenly inspired to cheer Aunt Dickson up, though they themselves disapproved of mid-morning refreshment. But to please the invalid they always did violence to their own digestions in the end, and drew near the round table where they ate and drank with well-simulated enjoyment. Aunt Dickson beamed so jollily over the thick cream and fragrant tea and little round cakes that they no doubt felt rewarded for their unselfishness, and exerted themselves to the utmost. One morning, indeed, Pauline was surprised to notice that three thin ladies without an appetite between them ate thirteen cakes and drank seven cups of tea, which shows once more what the flesh can accomplish when the spirit is animated by conscious virtue.

That happened, however, during Pauline's first year at Wendlebury; now she took it all as a matter of course, like going to bed at ten and knowing everybody by sight who passed the window.

On this particular morning it was Miss Amelia Pritchard only who tripped up the spotless white steps and was ushered as usual into the comfortable sitting-room. But there was something quite unusual about the manner in which she waited for Eva to retire.

"I had to come!" she exclaimed hysterically as soon as the door was closed. "I couldn't bear it any longer. Harriet is away for the day!" After which explosion she buried her face in her pocket-handkerchief and wept bitterly.

Her friends gazed at her in great concern.

"Harriet has only gone to see your niece at Ryeford Magna, I suppose?" suggested Aunt Dickson finally.

"Yes," sobbed Miss Amelia, "but she is so much stronger minded than I am. I can't bear the strain alone."

"What strain?" demanded Pauline, giving Miss Amelia's shoulder a gentle shake. "Do tell us what strain?"

"I don't know if I dare . . . Harriet . . ." answered the poor lady incoherently. Then she started up with an "Excuse me!" peered out into the passage, closed the door, murmured, "No, Eva appears to be upstairs," and sat down again with the air of a white mouse at bay. "Pauline," she continued, in a tone of eager seriousness, "you may perhaps have remarked that we used the little end sewing-room for the hats and cloaks at our party instead of taking our guests to my bedroom as usual?"

"Yes . . . now I come to think of it," said Pauline.

"Well, there was a reason. That is the secret which Harriet will not allow me to tell."

Aunt Dickson and Pauline glanced at each other; it seemed so incredible that the Misses Pritchard should have any disgraceful skeleton to hide . . . and yet . . . you never know.

"I don't like secrets," said Aunt Dickson. "Half the misery and nine-tenths of the bother in the world is caused by someobdy telling somebody else something in confidence that they might just as well shout from the house-tops."

"Do you really think so?" said Miss Amelia, eagerly swallowing advice which agreed with her own earnest desire.

"Sure of it," said Aunt Dickson, who began to be very

curious indeed, and may also have been unconsciously influenced by mixed motives.

"When I tell you that I am obliged to clean my own room and cannot have the gas repaired, though it jumps to an extent which is perfectly awful in the present circumstances," pursued Miss Amelia, "you will know that the matter is serious."

"But what is it?" cried Aunt Dickson, now impatient beyond all bounds. "Can't you tell us in two words what it *is?*"

"I can," said Miss Amelia, in a queer hollow tone, leaning forward and fixing her red-rimmed eyes on Aunt Dickson. "That is just what I can do. *Our ghost!*"

Aunt Dickson and Pauline started; then they cried, almost together—

"You must be joking!"

"Do I look as if I were joking?" said Miss Amelia simply, and, gazing at her, they felt the keen justice of the rebuke.

"I didn't mean to doubt your word," faltered Aunt Dickson apologetically. "But people's imaginations run away with them sometimes."

"So Harriet pretends to think," replied Miss Amelia. "She is afraid of being called a nervous old maid and so makes out, even to me, that it is the wind in the chimney." She paused, and continued solemnly: "Mrs. Dickson, did you ever hear a wind say Mary Jane?"

"Eh! What!" said Aunt Dickson: then she added soothingly, for she really did begin to fear for her old friend's reason: "Oh, I never heard of the wind saying that, exactly . . . but poets and people . . . there used to be a pretty song in my youth called, 'What are the wild waves saying?' . . . much the same . . ."

"Rubbish!" said Miss Amelia, agitated beyond all consideration of politeness. "That's how Harriet talks. She even imitates the wind howling to convince me, like this:

Moo—oo—ooh! Mary Jane!'' and Miss Amelia strove to personate a down-draught saying those words.

Aunt Dickson leaned back, the tension of her attitude slightly relieved.

"Well—it might be so," she said.

"But that is not all," pursued Miss Amelia, drawing her chair closer. "You may think what you like about Mary Jane, as I remarked to Harriet, but nobody on earth can make a natural wind say 'Damn your eye!' "

"No," agreed Aunt Dickson, staring aghast.

"You are shocked, naturally," said Miss Amelia. "*I* have reached that stage when nothing seems to matter." She lowered her voice. "But I say my prayers downstairs in the sitting-room, inconvenient though it is, with the maid in and out and so on. I really could not mingle . . ."

"Of course not," agreed Aunt Dickson hastily. "How strange! How dreadfully unpleasant! Pauline."

"Yes, Aunt."

"Do see that the door really is quite closed, dear."

"But when did you first hear it?" asked Pauline, returning from the inspection.

"A month ago. The very day when I told Harriet I had a headache and could not help to do the china closet out, though I was really quite well and only wished to finish a crochet pattern. I sometimes wonder . . ." Miss Amelia paused on that, tentatively.

"No!" said Aunt Dickson. "The Lord would never send a ghost for a little thing like that, I know. Too busy. Let us put the matter aside for a moment and have a cup of tea. I always think tea clears the intellect."

So Miss Amelia, protesting as usual, was induced to drink two cups of hot, comforting, well-creamed tea, and then felt so greatly refreshed that she was able to make a suggestion.

"There is Mr. Unwin," she said. "If it should be any sort of *real* wind he might be able to help us."

"Architects do know all about chimneys, of course," agreed Aunt Dickson hopefully. "Why not go and ask him to look at yours while Miss Harriet is away?"

But at this proposal Miss Amelia showed signs of becoming hysterical once more.

"Oh, I couldn't!" she said, wringing her hands. "I couldn't possibly. I should break down in Mr. Unwin's office and that would be simply dreadful. Only fancy if any one else came in! What would they think?"

"Write a note, then," said Pauline.

Miss Amelia shook her head, very much distressed and yet, beneath it all, superior.

"No, my dear. A delicate matter like this is not to be put down in writing. My sister might hear of it and she would never forgive me. She always says that the devil invented paper and pens for fools to give themselves away with. Poor father's expression, originally. Harriet has at times quite a masculine turn of thought." She paused and added ingratiatingly: "I suppose Pauline would not care to step as far as Mr. Unwin's office and put the matter before him? It is a pleasant morning though dull, and young people like exercise in the fresh air."

"I really don't see," began Pauline, not attracted by the prospect, when Miss Amelia broke in tragically—

"How *can* you refuse when you know it is my last hope? You are so clear-headed, you could explain the matter so lucidly."

Pauline felt doubtful, but pity for poor, troubled Miss Amelia prevailed over her reluctance, and very soon she was walking down the High Street, jostled by market-people and endeavouring to frame sentences which should make Unwin see the affair in a not too ridiculous light. But the task was beyond her, and on being ushered into a small private office hung with plans and engravings, she could only state bluntly—

"I have come from Miss Amelia Pritchard, who asks you to go to her house at once, if possible."

"All right," said Unwin easily, "do sit down. So nice to see a person here with coloured hair, you know. Most of my few clients were left me by my father, and they are white or grey. Makes me keep looking at mine to see if it's turning too; age is so infectious, isn't it?"

"Very," said Pauline, perching lightly on the edge of the great armchair. "When I think how I felt when I was twenty . . ."

"Ah, twenty!"

And they sighed together, united by the bond of their present advanced years. Then, reluctantly, for it was pleasant to talk of old age with Pauline, Unwin returned to the matter in hand. "What does Miss Amelia want this time?" he asked. "On the last occasion it was the kitchen sink. Not that I mind . . . the Wendlebury ladies simply can't help mixing me up with the plumber."

"The—the affair is rather difficult to explain," hesitated Pauline.

"Oh! Never mind. I quite understand," said Unwin hastily. For he thought—such things happening in life though romance naturally slurs them over—that there was something wrong with the domestic drainage system which delicacy forbade her to mention. "I'll take a plumber along with me."

"A plumber!" cried Pauline. "But what's the earthly use of a plumber when it's a ghost that may be a wind . . . or a wind that may be a ghost . . ." She broke off and looked anxiously at him. "Oh, dear, I know it seems awfully odd."

"No, no," said Unwin soothingly, reflecting that her eyes were after all much too bright, and that she had been very ill indeed with some sort of breakdown when she first came to Wendlebury.

"At least, it sounds like a wind, but it says 'Mary Jane,'" continued Pauline, struggling for the lucidity commended by Miss Amelia. "It says it in a strange

sort of way, of course; like this, Moo—ooh—ooh!" and she also tried to impersonate a down-draught with a supernatural vocabulary.

"Ah, yes. Nothing in that," said Unwin easily, but he took up his hat. "I had an old aunt who had a wind in her chimney that howled good-night as regular as clockwork. And now," he concluded, holding open the door with alacrity, "I suppose we had better be stepping along."

All desire to detain his guest in polite dalliance had completely vanished. But he felt very sorry indeed for her, and exerted himself as they walked along to pour forth a stream of light, soothing conversation. Beyond all things he was anxious to avoid a repetition of the windy Mary Jane in Wendlebury High Street, and he therefore flowed smoothly over all her replies, not allowing her to make a single connected speech, because the simplest thing might excite a person in her state of mind. So Pauline finally gave up any attempt at conversation, merely glancing at him from time to time, with a rather odd expression. No man, she reflected, could possibly be a drunkard and look as he did; there was something so especially pleasant and alive about him. Yet the idea of drunkenness suggested by Eva in this connection did just occur to her before it was dismissed.

They were both greatly relieved, therefore, when they arrived at the house and saw Miss Amelia's anxious face peering from the open door.

"Walk in," she said, using the voice which she kept for the funerals of people not nearly related. "This is indeed kind, Mr. Unwin." Then she abruptly altered her tone, grasped Pauline's sleeve and whispered urgently: "You can't go. I insist upon your remaining. Don't you know I have to accompany him into my bedroom?"

Pauline, who had been about to depart, was moved by this appeal and followed Miss Amelia up the narrow staircase, where the poor lady nearly broke her neck in turn-

ing round to twitter nervous remarks about the weather so that the situation might be carried off with decorum.

Unwin, who came last, felt very large and coarse among so much white floor-cloth and lacy cleanliness, and this impression was increased when he stood in Miss Amelia's room where the very chair seats had little white mats upon them edged with fine needlework, and the bed was like a flounced mid-Victorian lady prepared for a party.

"This," said Miss Amelia solemnly, "is the haunted room."

"The what?" said Unwin staring. "Then you really did send that message about—er—Mary Jane?"

"Of course I did," said Miss Amelia. "Has not Miss Westcott told you all about it?"

"Oh—er—yes," stammered Unwin. "I didn't quite understand. I mean . . ." He walked to the fireplace, pulling his wits together. "So you hear the noise somewhere about this spot, I gather?" he concluded professionally.

"Just about there," said Miss Amelia, greatly agitated. "Miss Westcott would no doubt describe the strange sound: like this—Moo—ooh—ooh!"

They all peered up the chimney . . . and as if in answer, came a ghostly echo, only much plainer: "Mary Jane!"

Pauline and Unwin both started, and Miss Amelia began to weep again in dismal resignation.

"It often behaves like that . . . the spirit answering . . . making fun of us. . . . Oh, Mr. Unwin, it does seem hard that if we have to have a ghost we can't have one like other people. I sometimes fear for my reason."

At the word reason, Unwin thought of his unfounded suspicion concerning Pauline, and again peered up the chimney with a slightly heightened colour.

"The sound certainly appears to come from up there," he remarked.

"Mary Jane! Damn your eye! Mary Jane!" retorted

the ghostly voice, shooting out the words in rapid succession.

Unwin straightened himself and turned round abruptly to Miss Amelia. "When did you last use this chimney?"

"Three years ago when I had bronchitis," she quavered, gazing up at him with tragic intensity.

"Then it's that beastly jackdaw from the Bowling Green Inn," he said.

"Jackdaw!" cried Pauline.

"Jackdaw!" shrieked Miss Amelia.

"They forgot to cut its wings and it has been lost for some time," said Unwin. "I play bowls there, and I asked what had happened to it."

"I knew it was a low ghost," said Miss Amelia faintly, sinking down on the nearest chair. "A public-house. . . . We are, indeed, all the victims of our surroundings." And her distress having been very great and the reaction sudden and complete, she subsided gently upon the floor.

In a moment or two, however, she opened her eyes and murmured fervently—

"Mr. Unwin—Pauline—your united kindness I can *never* forget."

"It is nothing. I am glad to have found the old villain," replied Unwin, and he went to procure a man, a ladder and other requisites for removing the bird from the disused chimney. But this proved to be no easy task, and it was after two o'clock when he finally stood before Miss Amelia and Pauline, very grimy indeed, with a still grimier bird in a covered basket.

"Well, here's the ghost at last," he said. "Its wings are clipped now, all right, but I thought the beggar was going to escape before I could get it out of its hiding place."

"Oh, how I shall sleep to-night!" sighed Miss Amelia. "Oh, Mr. Unwin, I can never, never thank you enough."

"Nonsense! Great fun, I assure you," said Unwin cheerily. "Rather like bird-nesting, which I always en-

joyed. And now I'll take the jackdaw back to the landlady with your compliments at once, if you don't mind."

"Landlady!" exclaimed Miss Amelia. "But, of course, you are jesting again. I am sure you quite understand that this matter must be kept absolutely between ourselves. My poor sister. . . . I can imagine nothing more painful to her than the knowledge that she had become part-heroine of what might be termed—er—a funny story."

"Quite so," said Unwin. "You may rely on my discretion, and I am convinced that Miss Westcott will be equally silent."

Then he made his adieux and retired with a grave formality rather marred, but not destroyed, by a streak of black over one eye.

Pauline accompanied him to the door, and as he was going out she said, hesitating—

"You know . . . you've been awfully good. But she's a dear, isn't she?"

"Of course she is. I love her," said Unwin.

Pauline laughed.

"You seem to love lots of people."

He glanced at her in slight surprise, as if it were a true fact about himself which he had not noticed before.

"Oh, well," he said, "people are jolly, aren't they?"

Then he went away, and Pauline stood looking after him as he went jauntily down the street carrying the jackdaw.

A fine rain was now falling, and he blessed this common circumstance because it would ensure the bowling green being sufficiently deserted for the private repatriation of the jackdaw. So he avoided the front door of the inn, slipped round to the back, and had just let the bird out of the basket when a red face appeared over the clipped hedge and a loud female voice shouted suddenly—

"Hi! What are you doing with our Mary Jane?"

Then, as Unwin straightened himself and stared at her: "Mr. Unwin! It's never *you*, Mr. Unwin?"

"Y-yes," acknowledged Unwin reluctantly. "The—er—fact is, I found your jackdaw and was just quietly restoring it to its old haunts." Then the word "haunt" seeming so particularly appropriate in this connection, he smiled at her. "Didn't want to make a fuss," he added.

"Seems not," said the landlady. Then she added, after a pause, "You can't help feeling it's queer."

"Such a lot of things are," urged Unwin. "Supposing we put this among the rest and say no more about it, eh?"

"Our little Bessie cried herself sick about losing the poor bird," said the landlady. "I can't get over that, all in a minute, nor Bessie neither."

"Do you think a new doll . . . as Mary Jane *has* come back?" suggested Unwin, tendering five shillings.

"Oh! well . . ." said the landlady, taking the money. "Only I'd rather know what really got our Mary Jane, you know."

As Unwin was unable, however, to satisfy this natural feminine instinct, he departed with all convenient speed and walked thoughtfully back to his office wondering why such things must always happen to him. So when the Vicar put up a detaining hand and said importantly: "One moment! There is something I wish to say to you in strictest confidence," it is not surprising that he replied, on the spur of the moment: "Not if I know it! Confidences are too much of a strain. Besides, I'm not a millionaire."

The Vicar smiled vaguely.

"Always a jest, always a jest; and a good thing too, in its way. But to be serious for a moment, my dear fellow . . ."

"I am serious," said Unwin; "I never was more serious in my life. I've had no lunch yet."

"Ah, yes," said the Vicar. "Well, I wanted to tell you about Lord Southwater. I hear from a private source

that he is seeking a new architect. But this must go no further."

Unwin nodded, and thus received a third confidence, after all.

The Vicar hesitated.

"I hope you won't think me impertinent, Unwin, but I rather fear your business is not—not quite what it was?"

"You might put it plainer than that without being offensively candid," said Unwin, with a laugh. "There is no scope for an architect in this neighbourhood now, as you know. But my poor father was broken-hearted at the thought of there being no Unwin to follow on after three generations, so I couldn't refuse . . ."

"No, no. I quite see. I quite see," said the Vicar. "You did what was right. That, in the end, is everything."

"Is it?" said Unwin. "Well, perhaps it is . . . only . . . Well, I've got to get my lunch now. Good-bye."

So the Vicar, who was a prig but a very kind prig, went on to his Mother's Meeting composing remarks about Unwin which should be suited to the all-powerful ear of Lord Southwater.

CHAPTER V

A VISITOR OF IMPORTANCE

LORD SOUTHWATER was a rich widower with a long, bald, pink face, a fine hand and a hobby for restoring and building churches. He indulged this taste to the full; consciously because he had a sincere love for ecclesiastical architecture; unconsciously, because he wished to occupy the same prominent position elsewhere as he had always done here.

At the present moment, however, he slept in a corner seat of a first-class railway carriage on his way to inspect the restorations which had been recently made in the chancel of Wendlebury Parish Church, and his last waking thought had been of Mrs. Delamere flashing eyes and teeth at him in welcome. Not that he had any great affection for his sister-in-law, but because her presence always gave him a faint sense of discomfort which he hid under a marked cordiality lest he should in any way seem to slight the memory of his dead brother, though he was a man to whom even the mildest duplicity was extremely distasteful.

While he thus slumbered, preparations for his due reception were being made in the little red-roofed town. Mrs. Delamere and her maids threw back the folding-doors and placed rows of chairs hired from the inn in the long, imposing apartment formed by drawing-room and dining-room combined: the Wendlebury ladies took out their best dresses from cedar-scented wardrobes, while Mrs. Chubb before her cottage hearth was brushing with great care the Sunday hat and coat of Mr. Chubb.

"You can do as you like," said that respectable cab-

driver, eating buttered toast and drinking tea with great truculence; which sounds difficult, tea and toast being essentially mild viands, but Chubb could make water-gruel the element of a jamboree. "I won't wear 'em," he concluded. "I tell you that, straight."

"But a lord——" entreated Mrs. Chubb. "And you do look so handsome when you're dressed, Chubby."

He frowned, hardening still more outside, but melting slightly within, and responded surlily—

"What's the use of figging myself out for Lord Southwater who never gives more'n a twopenny tip, eh? I like a lord to *be* a lord, and splash his money about a bit. That's what we keep 'em for, isn't it?"

But Mrs. Chubb was not to be switched off upon political issues and giggled persuasively—

"Mrs. White next door said only the other day that no wonder the ladies always wanted you to drive 'em out. She should be jealous if she was me, she says."

"Chattering old fool, she is," grunted Chubb: but at the same time he took the coat without seeming to be aware of it.

"If I was a lord," pursued Mrs. Chubb, patting his collar into place, "I should find a better hobby than doing up churches, shouldn't you?"

"I should that," agreed Mr. Chubb cordially. "Why, when you think his father won the Derby and his grandfather owned Perigord! It makes you believe in all this talk of the English race going to the dogs, it does indeed."

"Aye, and this Lord Southwater not knowing a hunter from an old lady's carriage horse," said Mrs. Chubb, "and spending hundreds, so they say, a-mending up the church here."

"Well, Unwin will have made a bit," said Chubb. "It was luck for him, Lord Southwater's architect being taken ill." He paused. "But if we ever get enough saved up to build out that porch, I don't know as I shall employ young Unwin. He'd forget something, I doubt."

"Aye—too flighty-like," said Mrs. Chubb, opening the cottage door for her husband. And as Mr. Chubb passed the bright windows of the other cottages, he glanced furtively at his own reflection, realising that his wife was not without some slight intelligence of the inferior female sort, for he did indeed look a fine figure of a man in his Sunday overcoat and hat.

Mrs. Chubb watched him turn the corner and was about to retire into the house when Eva, Mrs. Dickson's maid, appeared from the other direction, and after explaining that the cab was required for that same evening, she accepted an invitation to walk in. There was still some good tea in the pot and the two women sat down before the bright fire. A pleasant aroma of tea, hot butter and scorching bread filled the apartment, the very incense most acceptable to the nose of the goddess of scandal in this climate, though, being universal, she adapts her rites to the varying conditions of the world, and no doubt has perfumes equally able to loose the tongue elsewhere.

"And so," said Mrs. Chubb ("Another lump, do!) And so you want the cab for a quarter to eight? Mrs. Delamere's party, I suppose?"

"Yes; Chubb must mind and not let anybody run away with the cab this time," replied Eva, laughing.

"It's all very well to make a joke on it," said Mrs. Chubb, gazing solemn-eyed over the edge of her cup. "I know something about that, as would surprise you. But I'm no gossip and never was."

"No, nor me either," said Eva cordially. "Still, between two old friends like us . . ."

"It's different, of course," agreed Mrs. Chubb. "Now there's that Mrs. White, I wouldn't tell her anything I didn't want to go no further; no, not for a king's ransom."

"You're right there," said Eva. "But us Martins was always brought up to keep things to ourselves. I shall ever remember the day when our Emm came running home with a tale about a woman we knew stealing a

neighbour's coal. Mother gave our Emm such a clout on the head for gossiping before she went round to tell the neighbours about it. That's how I first learnt to be so careful. We've a lot to thank our mother for." She sighed, then dismissing the matter, continued in another tone: "You were going to say something about that cab affair when I interrupted, weren't you?"

"Not about the *cab,*" replied Mrs. Chubb.

"About Chubb then?"

"No, indeed."

"Unwin?" suggested Eva.

Mrs. Chubb nodded three times.

"What's he been doing now?" asked Eva, with the intense relish of those whose own lives afford no scope for drama. "He's *never* been and run away with the cab again?"

"No." Mrs. Chubb leaned forward and continued in a low, mysterious voice: "You know the Dragon at Ryeford? Well, there's somebody very ill there. Chubb's driven Doctor Carter over three times. *Each time*——" Mrs. Chubb paused.

"Well?"

"*Each time* Chubb saw Unwin hanging about the Dragon."

"Ah!" said Eva.

"He goes there to get his drink on the quiet," said Mrs. Chubb. "But I heard tell of him down at the Bowling Green Inn in Windlebury, too."

"Well," said Eva, reluctantly beginning to tear herself away by putting down her tea-cup. "As I always say, men's men. You can't make otherways of 'em. Particularly bachelors. A man and a mug o' beer—a boy and a apple-tree—there you are: you can't go against nature."

As Eva was reporting to her mistress the result of her errand, Unwin cycled past the window. Pauline, who stood near it, was giving scraps of information to the invalid by the fire.

"There's Unwin cycling past," she remarked, seizing hold of the topic with a degree of alertness that only those can understand who have been much with beloved, and old, and house-bound people. "I'm sure he ought to be at the church explaining the alterations to Lord Southwater by this time. I saw the Vicar going in when I passed half an hour ago."

"Lord Southwater is a very punctual man," remarked Aunt Dickson. "He won't like it if Unwin is late. Whatever can have made the foolish fellow cycle off to Ryeford at the last moment in this way?"

"Yes, and in the rain too," added Pauline.

Eva placed some change on the table and said nothing in words, but her facial expression was such that both Aunt Dickson and Pauline exclaimed together: "Eva, what do you know about it?"

"Nothing, oh, nothing," said Eva. "I'm no gossip, though you did say . . ." She broke off and retired, adding formally: "So it's scrambled eggs for supper."

But her very nose-end radiated suppressed information.

Dignity, however, forbade Aunt Dickson to call her back, and to her great disappointment she was allowed to close the door. Slowly she paced the passage to the kitchen where she stood considering for some time by the fire; at last her long features became illuminated; she hastened back to the room, put her head in at the door, and said in an apologetic tone: "Me memory's going. Did you say scrambled eggs for supper?"

"Yes." Aunt Dickson glanced up expectantly, while Eva came in, shut the door behind her, and said in a low voice: "I can't tell you a lie! I never have. I won't begin now, Unwin or no Unwin. I *did* hear something when I was at Mrs. Chubb's."

For a moment Aunt Dickson fought with her worse feelings and then gave in. She had found the day so long with the enforced inaction and constant, slight pain; and

the thought of something new to think about seemed like an anodyne.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," said Eva, enjoying the importance very much, "Mr. Unwin's been at the Dragon at Ryeford, I bet a button. He's always there."

"Who says so?" demanded Pauline.

"Chubb," said Eva.

"Oh, Chubb!" said Pauline.

Aunt Dickson thought for a moment.

"I really can't believe it of young Unwin," she said at last. "He is such a nice man."

"Aye," responded Eva darkly. "But the devil endows his own. We all know that. You never did meet a good-for-nought that wasn't nicer than he ought to be."

"I don't believe a word of it," declared Pauline.

But Eva was not offended because she instinctively knew Aunt Dickson and Pauline were only preserving the conventions, and that she had been as interesting as she could possibly have desired.

One part of the story did indeed bear evidence of truth, for Unwin arrived at the church with a damp jacket and the unmistakable mud of the Ryeford Road on his boots, and a general appearance of being sartorially unprepared for the august little group which awaited him.

Lord Southwater had been standing for some time on the lower step of the chancel, eyeglass in hand, while Mrs. Delamere murmured in a religious undertone: "I don't actually *visit* with the Wendlebury people, of course, but one's duty to one's neighbour . . . one has to consider that sometimes . . . so I thought it would be so delightful if you would give a short address on the architecture of Wendlebury Church this evening in my drawing-room. We know so little, really, of our church, and it enables me to invite those whom . . . you understand?"

Then Unwin came hurriedly up the aisle and Lord

Southwater advanced with that air of being the principal layman at a clerical conference which never seemed to leave him, and which the imagination pictured present even in his bath, where he no doubt gave to the soap and sponge the same impression of secular saintship.

Unwin made such apologies as he could muster, but the great man was at first very stiff and unapproachable, as was only natural in a benefactor who has been kept waiting, while the culprit himself was obviously worried and preoccupied, though he tried hard to bring his mind to bear upon the matter in hand. After a while, however, the genuine love of both men for the village churches of England—those homes of the religion and poetry and history of the race—began to draw them together. For beneath Lord Southwater's dull crust of self-importance and Unwin's young affectation of indifference was a springing enthusiasm which made their talk eager and vital. Each understood and saw in the other more than their words said, and to the Vicar and Mrs. Delamere was left that rather forlorn position of watching the minds of two men, utterly unlike each other, thus touching and fusing into a very harmonious understanding.

But once the inspection was over and the four stood grouped by the door speaking of the weather in the hushed tones desirable in a sacred edifice, all Unwin's former preoccupation and constraint returned. He could not feel at ease when he saw always, on the rich gloom of the church behind Lord Southwater's pink, important face, the face of the dying man at the Green Dragon. It seemed so strange and terrible that these two had been little brothers, playing at horses together. . . . The intolerable strangeness of human life gripped hold of Unwin. How could this man stand there, calm and important, unaware that his brother was dying amongst strangers only two miles away?

"Then, Mr. Unwin," and he started to hear Mrs. Delamere's graciously condescending voice through the gloom

and wonder, "we shall hope to see you this evening at eight o'clock?"

Unwin hesitated, but the Vicar's frown and his own knowledge of the unwisdom of offending Lord Southwater made him answer almost at once—

"Thank you, I shall be delighted to come, but I am obliged to leave immediately after the lecture."

"That is, of course, as you wish," said Mrs. Delamere, then to her guest, she added with dignity: "I think our carriage is waiting." And so the party emerged into the soft falling rain.

Chubb's mare stood patiently demure between the shafts, but at Unwin's affectionate "Hullo, Griselda!" she did flick a tail, as the demurest matron may on finding that she still has charms for a nice young man. And indeed Unwin did rejoice to see her, because she roused in him just for a moment the sense of fun which he hated to live without; he so actively detested being obliged to feel miserable.

"Wet day, Chubb," smiled Mrs. Delamere, claiming him as an old and grateful retainer: but Chubb maintained an unresponsive gravity, refusing to be so claimed by any one living for a less tip than threepence a journey.

As Unwin made his way down the street he was hailed from the curb by Miss Argle who was the one social equal of Mrs. Delamere, being an Argle of Argle Hall.

"Sorry to trouble you," she said excitedly. "Gentlemen so scarce in Wendlebury . . . away for some weeks . . . rather a delicate matter . . ."

"Then I think you'd better find some one else," said Unwin, with decision. "I'm no good at anything delicate." And he prepared to cycle on.

"Oh, please! Please!" cried Miss Argle. "It's my nephew. Seventeen. He is staying with me and has a new dress suit and Mrs. Delamere says evening dress optional. I do think it is a most trying thing for people

to say that, Mr. Unwin. There are problems enough in the world, I should suppose, without people adding to them by saying evening dress optional. If my nephew dresses and others don't, it looks a little ostentatious, doesn't it? And if he refrains and others do, he will be exceedingly angry with me and glower in a corner and refuse to hand round the coffee and sandwiches. So I thought I would ask you what you were going to do."

"Oh! I'll put on swallow-tails and then he'll feel all right, anyway. When in doubt, dress, I suppose," said Unwin.

"Oh! Quite an epigram, I declare," said Miss Argle. "Always so good-natured . . . see you this evening . . ." and she murmured herself away at last, leaving Unwin free to mount his bicycle.

When Mrs. Delamere said vaguely to her brother-in-law that his lecture gave her a chance to invite those whom . . . and left it, she was once more endeavouring to convey her most rigid principle, namely, that she did not visit with the Wendlebury people but only with the county, though she saw Miss Harriet and Miss Amelia Pritchard at least fifty times more often than, for instance, the Bracegirdles of Bracegirdle. But it is a foolish thing to think that voluntary climbers up are the only snobs, because involuntary climbers down are often just the same, and perhaps even more insistent.

So Lord Southwater's sister-in-law was very glad to show him to her little world in what might be termed a non-committal manner, and by eight o'clock her apartments gave one, as Miss Amelia remarked to Pauline, quite a brilliant example of what aristocratic At Homes in London must be like. And the jewel or apex of all this subdued splendour was the peer by the mantelpiece, who wore, not exactly a dress suit, but the sanctified and hybrid garb used by him for giving addresses at Young Men's Associations, consisting of a frock coat, a black tie, and a good deal of white shirt front.

As soon as the company was seated, the address began, and Lord Southwater's excellent flat voice boomed graciously across the fluttering rows of Wendlebury ladies in their light silks and laces and grenadines, with an odd man making a dark patch here and there. Miss Amelia sat next to the Vicar, and had seldom felt so much in spirits, with Pauline on her other side, and Unwin—most pleasant—in the row behind.

But when she turned round to catch Unwin's eye, while Lord Southwater paused for breath and water and there was a delicate clatter of applause, she felt disturbed to see his look of stern gravity, for it had not occurred to her that his blunt, debonair features could wear such a look. Then Lord Southwater gave a preparatory cough and the impression faded from the surface of her mind.

Unwin, however, still sat with his eyes fixed on the speaker, and his look remained the same. For behind Lord Southwater he again saw Delamere's worn cheeks and burnt-out eyes. And no pictured comparison of Hogarth could have been so startlingly real to Unwin's modern view as that large, pink, assured face with the other one looming behind it.

Yet Delamere had been the best loved son of his mother. His first wreckage had come through a sort of love. Unwin loved him now, though he was irritable, wretched, dying. And no one had ever greatly loved Lord Southwater.

Unwin thought this, sitting there among the gaily clad Wendlebury ladies; but he could find no answer to the immortal problem. And, gradually, for he had been already watching three consecutive nights at the Dragon, the sonorous periods of the speaker began to make him drowsy. He ceased to think and puzzle and let his glance rest idly upon Pauline's ear as it emerged from the shadow of her dark hair. She had pretty ears, he thought, and a pretty neck. How exquisitely she was shaped altogether. . . . A man scarcely noticed how delicately lovely

she was until he sat near her quietly and watched her . . . her quick, bright eyes seemed to ward off a man's glances when she was talking. . . . By now he was almost asleep from sheer fatigue, while, half-real and half-unreal, Pauline's slender neck over the chair-back, with a little curling lock upon it, bloomed vaguely before him like the thick petal of a white camelia. He thought, quite aimlessly, that it must be cool and soft to the touch like the petal of such a flower. Then he awoke with a start to the realisation of his surroundings and knew that Lord Southwater had ceased speaking.

With that full awakening came other thoughts, much more urgent, and in the confusion caused by all the ladies congratulating Lord Southwater he managed to slip away.

But Mrs. Delamere did not seek to detain any of her departing guests, remarking casually, indeed, that Lord Southwater liked to retire early, which, as Miss Amelia said, would in some people have seemed almost like a hint to go. It being impossible, however, that a hostess of Mrs. Delamere's breeding could be inhospitable, the ladies took the statement at its face value and twittered out into the front hall, where they waited in a strong draught for a long time while the four Wendlebury cabs lumbered back and forth as speedily as convenient.

Pauline, being young, had to wait until the very end, and nothing but the strongest sense of gratitude to Aunt Dickson could have made her obey the last injunction: "on no account to walk home through the wet." But at last she, also, was safely in her little, straight-fronted house, where a light gleaming beneath Aunt Dickson's downstair bedroom door showed that interested spectator of life to be still awake and eagerly awaiting news.

A moment or two the girl hesitated with her hand on the knob of the door, because her head ached badly and she longed for bed and darkness and quiet, then she turned the handle and went in.

"Awake still?" she said cheerfully.

Aunt Dickson nodded and looked out expectantly over her gay patchwork quilt.

"Well, who was there? Did any one ask after me?"

But her face was unusually sad and dull because she had been feeling during the evening the irksomeness of being chained down by her old body while her spirit was still so ardent and full of youth.

"The Vicar said he was sorry not to see you there," said Pauline. "We had sandwiches called chicken, but Miss Amelia saw Mrs. Delamere buying a couple of rabbits yesterday and she said it might be a co-incidence, of course . . . such strange co-incidences did happen."

Pauline's voice and manner were so like Miss Amelia's that Aunt Dickson said reprovingly: "Come, come, Pauline, you know that is a dangerous gift." But she already began to glance out jolly and alert above her patchwork quilt instead of staring across it in dull acquiescence.

So Pauline drew a chair near the bedside and sat down to give a full account of the evening's entertainment, leaving out no frill or furbelow, and lending to the whole a glow and verve which it had certainly never possessed. This was, indeed, a sort of enchanted party that Pauline had brought home, and Aunt Dickson nodded and chuckled and exclaimed, as if the familiar figures were playing their different parts around her bed.

"Well," she said at last, "it must have been delightful to see when it is so pleasant even to hear about. But you never mentioned Unwin. Was he not there?"

"Oh, yes," said Pauline casually. "He slipped away before any one else."

"Why was he in such a hurry, I wonder?" said Aunt Dickson.

"Oh, something better to do, I suppose," said Pauline.

But she also rather wondered why Unwin had left before any one else.

CHAPTER VI

CRANBIE'S SALE

AUNT DICKSON having been to a party, though only by proxy, awoke next morning filled with vim and go. She even felt a sort of bustling satisfaction in the knowledge that the stress of living was to be further increased by the advent of Mrs. Chubb.

Whiz! went her bell through the house before Pauline was up, and when Eva appeared—at her leisure—Aunt Dickson said alertly—

"Ask Miss Pauline to come here immediately she has breakfasted. And tell Mrs. Chubb to use the new carpet-sweeper to-day, it will save her a lot of hard work."

"She won't," said Eva. "She's like deaf Sammy Burton in our village. When parson gave him a new coat, he would wear the sleeves turned up because he'd had to wear his old one so. Us Martins never was like that. My grandmother learnt a fresh way of making cheesecakes when she was seventy."

"You must explain to Mrs. Chubb," insisted Aunt Dickson.

Eva shook her head.

"Mrs. Chubb's one of those that won't be telled. You can't do nothing with a person that won't be telled; there's no hope for them."

Then she retired and Pauline soon entered to find Aunt Dickson sitting up in bed with a blue pencil in her hand and catalogues spread on the patchwork quilt reading "Tea-cloths Absurdly Marked Down," and "Towels Positively Given Away," a supreme effort of Wendlebury commerce.

The Sale was to take place at Cranbie's shop in the High Street, owing to the death of the senior partner, and though certain French names convey something to London ladies speaking of apparel, they cannot furnish the solid unassailable impression of good stuff and solid money's worth which is ours when we say, rather carelessly: "Oh, yes; I got it at Cranbie's!"

Some of the younger people now purchase ready-made garments by post from a distance, and it has to be owned that they have quite an air outwardly. But Miss Harriet voiced the sentiments of many when she murmured: "One always wonders a little how the seams are overcast. A raw seam would give me an impression of sartorial insecurity which no lady should countenance."

We customers of Cranbie's, however, were seamed and boned and felled and overcast until we could have stood anything short of a charge of dynamite under our petticoats with a certainty of absolute propriety.

But a sale, even at Cranbie's, was an event which the most select circle in Wendlebury preferred to ignore, the assumption being that sales were low affairs, at which it was in some vague way derogatory to be seen.

Thus when Pauline went out early to catch the first bargains for Aunt Dickson, and met Mrs. Delamere in Cranbie's doorway as the door opened, that lady frowned, flushed, and said with a jaunty air—

"What an early bird! My cook has sent me out for some preserving sugar: my brother-in-law Lord Southwater sent me a splendid hamper of strawberries last evening," and so passed on.

But when Pauline had wrestled with the towels and turned sharply round a grove of quilts to the "Teacloths Absurdly Marked Down," she came face to face with Miss Harriet and Miss Amelia.

There they were. Blankly, unmistakably they were there; and it was a second or two before Miss Harriet said carelessly: "I am looking for the stocking counter.

Everything upside down with this dreadful sale. I think I must wait until next week when things will be more in order."

With that she moved towards the door of the shop, followed by poor Miss Amelia in so crestfallen a fashion that Pauline said hastily—

"Oh, do look round, now you are here. I—I—I really think——" She lowered her voice: "Miss Harriet, would it not be a mark of respect to poor Mr. Cranbie if you bought something at the sale?"

Miss Harriet and Miss Amelia glanced at each other, pausing on their outward way.

"It is, of course, occasioned by his death," allowed Miss Harriet; "I had a great respect for Mr. Cranbie."

"Served us well—many years—a sort of last tribute," fluttered Miss Amelia, beginning to hope again.

And after a few more such remarks the ladies returned to the centre of the shop, where they were soon eagerly discussing odd lengths of delicate ribbons such as appeared in the age of crinolines, and had remained since that easy, flowery time in the dark drawers and corners of the old place.

A little later Pauline saw them pricing some petticoats which hung in a long row above a centre counter, and as Miss Harriet pulled a lavender one aside, her nose almost came into contact with the nose of Mrs. Delamere. Both ladies, though they *were* ladies in the highest sense of the word, had for one moment the appearance of two denizens of the jungle suddenly encountered through an undergrowth where each had thought herself alone.

Then Mrs. Delamere recovered, flashed eyes and teeth in a perfect ecstasy of welcome, and remarked—

"I am looking for the stocking counter. So confusing, this sale. I think I shall leave my stockings for a few days."

"Oddly enough," said Miss Harriet, "that was also our errand."

"Stockings this way, madam," said the attentive shop-walker behind.

So there was no help for it, and they were obliged to purchase the stockings which neither needed, after which it seemed as if a general exodus must ensue; but as Miss Harriet passed the "Splendid Materials Marked Down to One Shilling per Yard," she hesitated, then bent close to Mrs. Delamere and whispered solemnly: "Poor Mr. Cranbie! I really feel, after so many years of faithful service—just one or two lengths—don't you?"

"Well," admitted Mrs. Delamere, "perhaps we ought. I did not see it in that light before. I dare say, poor man, he would be gratified if he could only know."

"Perhaps he does know," said Miss Amelia in a low voice, with an eye on the brown alpaca.

And in this spirit they felt able to turn over the bales and remnants for so long a time that the salesman's smooth hair grew rough and his spruce collar crumpled, as he assisted them to choose between French merino and cashmere.

Pauline had completed her own purchases long before they emerged, and she was glad to escape alone, for her head began to ache again badly from the close air of the shop. It was pretty certain that the ladies would need tea and refreshment and would call upon Aunt Dickson to recount their bargains now these could be placed in an almost memorial light, so she went past the house and into the open country.

The day was pleasant with the hedgerows bursting into leaf, and as she took her accustomed way along the Ryeford Road her thoughts cleared and lightened, every-one knows how, who loves walking in the country. She lost the sensation of a mind clogged by cotton-wool which had made her unable to face the daily round of callers and luncheon followed by translating part of a Russian novel—the Russian language being one of the difficulties

she had desperately overthrown during that fierce fight for efficiency in London.

As she passed the scarecrow it seemed to stand with a degenerate, music-hall rakishness amid the springing corn, hat cocked and dismal trousers fluttering, the same pitiful travesty of fun. But it recalled to her memory the old times when she had taken holiday after a week's hard work. She had wanted to laugh—they had all seized so eagerly on anything that advertised laughter. It was the same with sick people and patent medicines . . . the desperate pathos of life . . .

Her wandering thoughts stopped suddenly, with a jerk. At first she almost thought the man's figure staggering out of the Dragon must be a figment of the brain, a materialised memory of those same holiday evenings. Then she saw it was Unwin, still wearing his evening clothes from the night before. He looked ghastly in the morning sunshine with rough hair and shirt-front rumpled, and leaned back against the door-post of the inn.

Pauline turned sharp round and ran back for a long way down the road, feeling strangely outraged, though she had seen such a sight in London often enough and had only been casually disgusted. Men were so, she had supposed, taking the ugly philosophy of the streets. But here it seemed different, here it seemed horrible.

Even when she was home again and sitting quietly before her own writing-table, she still felt something within her tremble at the shock, and work seemed impossible. But she had the habit of concentration and sat on, doing badly and tearing up, until she could translate the portion she had intended to do.

Aunt Dickson sat by the fire playing patience before going to bed, and Pauline looked across at the big, kindly face which wore now an expression of dull endurance, purely physical. As soon as the girl spoke, however, the

old woman's brave spirit flashed out through the tired body and it was jolly Aunt Dickson again.

"Won't you put away the cards and talk for a while?" said Pauline.

"I thought you seemed tired. You have scarcely spoken a word since tea. You like to read in an evening sometimes, of course."

"I'm not a bit tired. Well——" and Pauline began to tell about Cranbie's sale and the day's doings. In a few minutes Aunt Dickson had forgotten she was old and ill and not far from the end of life, and was laughing heartily.

"Ha-ha! So it was you who suggested buying things out of respect to Mr. Cranbie. But it showed a nice feeling on their part," she added, ever charitable. "And where did you go after that?"

"For a walk on the Ryeford Road. Aunt Dickson—"

"Well?"

"I saw Mr. Unwin come staggering out of the Dragon in the dress clothes he was wearing last night. He looked dreadful. I can't get it out of my mind."

"Oh!" Aunt Dickson's face puckered into concern until her little bright eyes were almost hidden. "Oh, I am so sorry. If only one could do anything. Poor boy!"

"It's disgraceful! He ought to be ashamed," said Pauline. "He has no excuse."

"Perhaps it is this quiet place. We must ask him here more, Pauline, though it is rather troublesome having gentlemen to dinner with only Eva. But I dare say he has not enough society and gets drawn to public houses like the young men one reads about. I fear we Wendlebury people are to blame."

"Aunt Dickson!" exclaimed Pauline, jumping up, "I do believe if you met the devil you'd say 'Poor fellow, I expect he mixed with goats in his early youth, and horns are so infectious!'"

"No, no—but poor young Unwin——" murmured Aunt Dickson apologetically, and the ladies retired to bed.

A tea-party was taking place at Aunt Dickson's and Miss Argle sat alone by the tea-table, which still groaned with queen cakes and ladies' fingers, though tea was already over. The other guests gathered round Aunt Dickson's chair and looked at some fine crochet with their backs purposely turned to Miss Argle, who opened her black satin bag and hastily stowed away as many cakes as it would hold. And so deeply had the Wendlebury change affected Pauline that she forgot to think this odd, though at first she had been paralysed with amazement and pity. It seemed to her so terribly pitiful that a little old lady like a Dresden china curate's wife should be driven by hunger to such expedients.

Then she discovered that Miss Argle was quite comfortably off, and that the cake-stealing was just an aristocratic echo, which all Wendlebury understood, from those roystering times when Argles sallied forth from Argle Tower to lift their neighbours' cattle. This foible in an otherwise perfectly sane and ordinary member of society had not been lopped off summarily because such growths do survive in very quiet places, and Pauline never felt sure that the Wendlebury ladies did not vaguely enjoy being thus so distantly connected with the adventurous past.

When the party left and Pauline returned to her translating upstairs, Miss Argle stayed on because she greatly enjoyed Aunt Dickson's society, though she and Mrs. Delamere—who occupied together the summit of Wendlebury society—always apologised to each other for this preference by saying that "poor Mrs. Dickson was so kind-hearted"—a remark made by some people when they desire to visit any one not very high in the social scale whom a good deal may be got-out-of. At any rate, here sat Miss Argle and Aunt Dickson together in a pleasant room be-

fore a bright fire, while the streets outside looked rather cold and grey in the spring evening.

"I'm glad you stayed," said Aunt Dickson; "I wanted to ask you a favour."

"Of course. Only I am afraid I promised faithfully not to pass on the recipe for gooseberry jelly. Mrs. Delamere's cook——"

"It's not the jelly. But now you mention Mrs. Delamere—I want you to use your influence with her as well."

"What about?"

Aunt Dickson hesitated, but the thought of young Unwin leaning in a drunken stupor against the portal of the Dragon Inn made her go on.

"Wendlebury might be considered a dull place——"

"*I* never find it dull." And Miss Argle's tone inferred that if she did not——

"Nor I," responded Miss Dickson. "But a young man like Mr. Unwin might do so. There is very little gaiety in the evenings because our parties are nearly all for luncheon or tea. A young man might, for want of anything else, go to a public-house, say?"

"If he is that kind of young man . . ." began Miss Argle.

"Nobody is to start with, or very few. But if none of his own class ask him out he gets lonely. You have to make allowances. I think we ought to invite Mr. Unwin out more in the evenings."

"Has he——?" Miss Argle paused. "What a dreadful pity! Such a nice young man! He was particularly pleasant about the dress-suit, and never said a word afterwards, though nobody wore one but himself and my nephew and they looked rather conspicuous. I would do anything I could, but I usually retire early, after a light meal, bread and milk or something of that kind." She paused. "Oh, I see! You were thinking about Mrs. Delamere in that connection. She certainly does seem to be the only lady in Wendlebury who has meat cooked in the

evening. I always consider it almost a little unrefined in a lady to take meat after sunset. Still, in her position . . . accustomed to it . . . not but what the Argles . . ."

"No one has a better right than the Argles," said Aunt Dickson, in perfect good faith, with no flippant reference to the cattle-lifting past.

"But is this true about young Unwin?" said Miss Argle. "He looks so—so undrunken, if you know what I mean?"

Aunt Dickson shook her head, genuinely grieved and anxious.

"There's no doubt of it. Pauline saw him on the morning after Lord Southwater's lecture come staggering out of the Green Dragon at Ryeford still in his dress clothes."

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I wish I had not persuaded him to wear them," said Miss Argle, greatly distressed. "Not that it makes any real difference, only it seems more—more ribald, somehow. Of course, I'll do my best."

They talked on for some time in lowered tones, and on parting Miss Argle said very solemnly—

"It would be an awful thing if we had that young man's soul to answer for at the Last Day!"

For an instant the pleasant room faded, and they had a vision of themselves standing with the other Wendlebury ladies in a ring round the throne of God. It was quite simple and very real. Miss Argle kissed Aunt Dickson—a mark of affection usually bestowed only on Mrs. Delamere—and went out.

A little later Eva came to remove the tea-things. Taking up the empty queen-cake dish she remarked cheerfully—

"Rum how things is!"

"Eh, Eva?" said Aunt Dickson, who had been nodding.

"I said things was rum. If some folks was to steal

cakes nobody would speak to 'em, even if they was ladies born. Same as old Ducky Bill in our village that nabbed eggs by the score for years and nothing happened, and Ginger Walker did it once and got taken up."

"It is a mystery," said Aunt Dickson sleepily.

"Yes, 'm. Like where pins goes to," agreed Eva. "Well, as my mother used to say, guessing about what you know you can't know is like eating sour apples. You've only yourself to blame when your inside gets unsettled. But us Martins was always guessers."

"Eva," said Aunt Dickson, rousing herself; "about those cakes. . . . You really must not say that Miss Argle took them."

"I never named no names, 'm," muttered Eva, closing the door. "But things *is* rum and nobody on earth can't make out any different."

CHAPTER VII

STRANGERS

OUT of the unimportant world which surrounds Wendlebury came two strangers about the same time. One was an active, hit-you-on-the-eye-or-convert-you, Church of England missionary, and the other was a youngish untidy woman, with a queer air of having been hunted through life. They actually travelled down in the same train, which is another proof, if any were needed, of the truth of Eva's theory about the eternal rumness of things; but while the gentleman took his big, bright, Christian way to the Vicarage, the lady hastened along towards the Ryeford Road. When about half-way between Wendlebury and the Green Dragon, she saw a very small funeral coming along the road and stood quite still to let it pass. Unwin rode with Doctor Carter in Chubb's cab, and there was the hearse, and that was all.

The woman turned very white and ran a step or two after the cab.

"Whose funeral is that?" she called, and both Unwin and the doctor peered out amazed at this woman who could disturb a funeral procession.

"Hi! Cabby!" she shouted in a high, shrill voice. "Tell me! Do you hear? Tell me!"

Chubb glanced round, outraged.

"Get away, woman!"

She ran forward and clutched her hands on the door of the slow-moving cab, thrusting her dark face in at the window.

"Won't you tell me?"

"The name is Johnson. He was a stranger who took ill at the inn and died there." Dr. Carter cleared his throat. "He—he left nothing. He had a small annuity which died with him."

The woman's sallow face flushed crimson, then she grew very pale again.

"I didn't——" She stopped short. "Thank you." Then she dropped behind and they saw her no more. "No use telling her the name is really Delamere, even if she knows," said Dr. Carter.

"No. Poor chap, he wanted to be buried as Johnson. What strange things happen!"

"If you were a doctor, you'd soon learn to find nothing strange!"

The vigorous clergyman greeted the Vicar on his return home from the funeral with a robust Christian jollity. He thought that the brethren should give the impression of religious hustle, as if they really were beginning to rush people along the road to heaven. And he had barely eaten his first piece of toast before he was endeavouring to wrench from the Vicar the besetting sin of Wendlebury, in order that he might go for it that evening and keep on going for it during the whole three days of the mission.

"Specialise! Concentrate! You want efficiency in religion as in all else," said the Missioner, standing with his back to the fire; and the Vicar, who had always held himself to be more energetic and hard-working than the average, suddenly felt wobbling and purposeless.

"But I couldn't really say. There is no outstanding sin rampant here so far as I know."

"My dear fellow, I know by experience how one becomes dulled through the daily routine. But there must be some special fault that wants dealing with; there always is. Drink?"

"No. I should call Wendlebury a sober place." Then

the Vicar's eye brightened, and he felt he had found a sin before being made to look hopelessly incompetent. "I think gossip would be a good subject. There is a great deal of gossiping always in a small place."

"Ha!" said the Missioner, as if it were a live animal that he was catching by the tail and pinning down. "I'll concentrate on that then. Thank you!"

"Another cup of tea?" said the Vicar's wife, coldly, from the sofa. She felt that the sins of Wendlebury were entirely the Vicar's affair, and that the Missioner's violent interest in them was a sort of spiritual poaching.

But in the evening it appeared that the man was indeed a stirring preacher. He shocked Miss Harriet terribly by making almost what might be called jokes in the pulpit, but she did think, all the same, that what he said was extraordinarily applicable to Miss Argle, while Miss Argle was greatly struck by some remarks which seemed really made for Miss Harriet. The peroration was strong, moving, abruptly-ending, and they all came out wondering how those felt for whom it had been so peculiarly fitted.

But Miss Amelia—being one of the very few who took it to themselves—said nothing as she walked away under the stars, amongst a group of ladies in last year's hats brightened with new flowers. She was considering one piece of advice given by the practical Missioner, which was to put a finger on the lip when about to gossip, and to say inwardly: "Keep Thou the door of my lips."

At Miss Argle's door the ladies parted and tripped home separately or in couples between the narrow white houses. About it all brooded a wonderful security and peace which they did not realise at all or it could have been no longer theirs.

"Well, a good many people ought to have burning ears to-night," said Miss Harriet in a satisfied tone, as soon as they were alone. "It would not do Pauline Westcott any harm. I saw her just in front of me. She overdresses for her station, I consider."

"Yes, they say she——" began Miss Amelia, then clapped her hand on her lips and whispered something.

"What's the matter?" demanded Miss Harriet, not unnaturally.

But Miss Amelia did not say, her religion being a very shy and secret thing between herself and her Maker.

Unwin walked along the little streets between his office and the Bowling Green Inn feeling very cheerful, though he had been truly grieved by Delamere's lonely end. But it takes a deep and personal grief to depress a young man who has almost attained the position he would have chosen for himself had the world been given him to choose from; and Lord Southwater's last letter was written in terms which left little doubt that the next would contain a definite offer. Unwin was wise enough to know how very rarely it happens in life that a man can follow his own trade and earn a good living, and yet do that which he loves best and will best bring out all the powers of his soul and intellect. So it is not surprising that he called a cheerful good-day to Mrs. Chubb when he encountered her hurrying along the pavement; but he was astonished to see her stop, gasp, goggle and pant out, holding on to his sleeve lest he should walk on before she could find breath: "Judgment . . . fortune-telling . . . edged fire . . . for God's sake go in at that open door while I run for oil, and see if she's smouldering."

Mrs. Chubb let go his sleeve as suddenly and bolted up the street, leaving him staring after her. But as it is obviously impossible to leave any person smouldering while you speculate, he turned round, ran to the indicated door, and followed a smell into a darkened room.

At first he could distinguish nothing after the strong, spring light outside, then he saw a candle burning in the gloom, and at last a white face looking out at him with a dreadful expectancy over the candle—

"You—you've brought some message?"

Then he recognised the woman who had peered into Chubb's cab as it followed Delamere to the grave. He shook his head, feeling he would have given worlds to tell her a comforting lie; but he could not lie with those eyes upon him.

"How ridiculous!" She stepped back, trying to laugh. "I don't know what I said that for. . . . Suppose I was startled by your bursting into the rooms. What do you want?"

"Mrs. Chubb sent me. She—she said you were smouldering."

Then, in spite of the misery in her eyes, the woman did genuinely laugh.

"It was not me, only a bit of my sleeve and my landlady's antimacassar. But Mrs. Chubb had just asked to have her fortune told—curiosity warring against conscience and getting the best of it—and she thought hell-fire had combusted spontaneously. I dare say the darkened room and all that scared her. This black yashmak and drawn curtains in the daytime are my modern substitute for the witches' cat, you see."

She talked quickly, her voice high and reedy with the excitement of controlled emotion and yet resolutely gay. Unwin felt something in himself respond to her so strongly that it leapt over the first barriers of this strange acquaintanceship and made him blurt out suddenly—

"What on earth ever made you do it?"

"Oh, well!" She bent forward to look at him and the candle threw queer lights and shadows on her thin face. "You needn't think *he* had anything to do with it!" she said defensively.

"No," said Unwin.

"We met out in Australia, you know. I had enough to exist on . . . I have now. Only I can't exist. I must have plenty or starve. So here I am tied to these lodgings until next quarter day, when my remittance comes. And I'm making a bit by fortune-telling, as I always do when

I get a chance in the lean times." She paused, smiling at him with her odd, rather one-sided, smile. "Garrulous woman, eh? But there's method in my madness. I want——" Her voice sank in spite of herself from its gay note. "I want to be left in peace for a little while."

"You don't suppose——" began Unwin hotly.

"I didn't know. It was you who sent the letter and the photograph from him. I thought you might be connected with the Delameres and want me out of the place. You know I'm the Delia Lambert you wrote to for him."

"Of course I do." He paused. "But you must be aware that he called himself Johnson while he was in these parts. He was buried as Johnson."

She looked down, thinking, for quite a long time.

"So it came to that, did it?" she said at last. "Then nobody knows but you and me?"

"Dr. Carter knows also, but he will never tell," said Unwin. "Poor Delamere had such a strong wish; and it's all we can do for him now—to keep quiet."

"Are you afraid I shall try to get anything out of Lord Southwater or Mrs. Delamere? You needn't be." She broke off. "Good God! You don't suppose I want to advertise. . . . But it was like him, wasn't it? to forget me for years and then send me that letter and photograph when he was dying? I never knew such a sentimentalist . . . and yet . . ."

"That's just it," said Unwin. "You couldn't help loving him."

"You felt that too?" she said, and a beautiful change came over her face, making the mocking lips tender and the eyes wide, for she was finding that greatest human comfort of all mourners in meeting some one who had loved the dead. "I was at the funeral," she continued in a low voice. "And when it was all over I just crept into the Bowling Green Inn. I—I couldn't go away."

Unwin went nearer to her and put his hand on her arm.

"Poor girl! Poor girl!"

"Oh, I'm all right here," she said quickly. "These rooms are very cheap because my landlady is a little working dressmaker who is out all day. She is a kind soul, and tells her ladies about me in strictest confidence, and they all say how foolish and wrong fortune-telling is."

"That's a nuisance," said Unwin.

"Oh, they come all the same," said Delia, with her sudden, odd smile.

He smiled responsive, but she looked so fragile—with such a different fragility to Pauline's—so battered by life, that it was like seeing a woman push a load too heavy for her strength. He was impelled to try and push too.

"Look here," he said, "you must let me help you."

She shook her head.

"But I don't need any help, thank you. And so far as that goes . . ." She grew grave and tender again. "Oh, you'll never know how you have helped me."

"But let me do something. There must be something I can do for you," he urged.

"All right," she said. "You can stay here while I go upstairs to change my singed blouse, and reassure Mrs. Chubb. I don't want her to go away with the idea that there is anything seriously satanic about me for fear she upsets my little dressmaker and I get turned out."

"That's nothing," said Unwin.

She glanced back at him from the doorway with her twisted smile, but there was a keen edge of decision in her tone.

"It's all I want doing, you see, Sir Knight. The glove is in the arena."

"Oh, all right," he said quickly. "There *is* something about Mrs. Chubb rather like a long, wobbly, soiled kid glove—now one comes to think of it."

But as he sat down to wait for Mrs. Chubb and began to think things over, he did realise how very queer it all

was; here he sat in a dark room with one candle burning as if he were going to tell fortunes himself. It must be rather a lark, telling fortunes, he thought; and he put on the black silk yashmak to try the full effect of his surroundings.

He was thus engaged when Mrs. Chubb rushed in with the oil bottle.

"What! You're ready! You're all right?" she panted, breathless.

And at once a brilliant inspiration came to Unwin.

"Yes," he whispered, drawing the yashmak closer and placing the candle further away. "I was not burnt at all, only the antimacassar. But I have lost my voice through the shock. I do if I fall downstairs, or—or anything. Constantly doing it . . . from a child . . . often spanked."

"No!" said Mrs. Chubb. "Well, I'm a believer in corprill punishment myself. Them lads next door . . ."

"Well, shall we begin?" said Unwin, placing the other chair invitingly in the light while he sat in the shadow.

"Not for me; thanking you all the same," said Mrs. Chubb, backing towards the door.

Unwin wished he had not started the game, for this seemed no way of reassuring Mrs. Chubb; but he felt now bound to go on lest he should make matters worse.

"But you must want to know just one thing," he whispered insinuatingly, "otherwise you would never have asked me to tell your fortune. Come now, what is it?"

Mrs. Chubb reluctantly sat down. Then she started up again.

"What have you done with Mr. Unwin?"

"Oh, he's all right: had some silly business or other to attend to," said Unwin hastily.

"Um, he generally has," said Mrs. Chubb, reassured by such a common-sense supposition and seating herself

once more. "He is a silly young fool at the best o' times."

"H'h'm!" said Unwin, turning his sudden chuckle into a cough. "But do let us start now, Mrs. Chubb, and forget all about him."

"Well, just for the joke of the thing. There's nothing in it, of course. I suppose you want my hand?"

"N-no," said Unwin, spurred on by this new difficulty and hiding his own under the table. "I just gaze into the future."

"Um," said Mrs. Chubb, "I've see a-many gipsies do it, and they always took hold of your hand. I suppose real professionals does." She sighed. "Well, I was going to ask you if I should get another husband when Chubb's gone? I've often wondered that, hearing him snoring at nights and thinking how lonesome I shall be."

"But you're both about the same age. Perhaps you'll die first," said Unwin, hastily ranging himself among the husbands of the world.

"Then you can't tell me. I thought not, not wanting me hand nor nothing." She rose. "There was one more question——"

"Do ask it, Mrs. Chubb," interposed Unwin in an urgent whisper, anxious to retrieve his mistake. "Please do ask it."

"Well, as I am here. Does Chubb . . . I mean is there . . ." She paused, finding a difficulty. "You see Chubb's such a taking man with the ladies." And she threw herself thus on the hearer's understanding.

"You wish to know, in short," said Unwin, with great solemnity, "if you have a rival?"

Mrs. Chubb nodded, her round eyes almost supernaturally round in her pale moon-face.

"He's such a taking man, you see. It isn't *him* I blame."

"Of course not," agreed Unwin. "Wait a moment. Keep silence. Hush! I see . . ."

"Not that widder next door!"

"Brown hair . . . large . . . very large . . . I can't quite . . ."

"The hussy! I thought so. Twelve stone if she's a pound. And her hair dyed as sure as my name's Chubb."

"I see . . . legs . . ."

"Ma'am," cried Mrs. Chubb, "you've gone far enough for me!"

"Two, three, four. Mrs. Chubb, I see four legs. It's——" he relapsed into his ordinary tone, "it's Griselda!"

"Ah!" shrieked Mrs. Chubb, jumping up and pulling at the yashmak. "It's you! You and your Tom-fool tricks! I might ha' known!"

"You never would," said Unwin, "but for the fact that I couldn't, after all, sow life-long dissension between you and Chubb."

"Take shame to yourself, Mr. Unwin," said Mrs. Chubb. "You're the very one to get mixed up with fortune-telling and all that, you are!"

"Come to that," said Unwin, for a worm will turn, "it was *you* who sent me in here, you know."

"It was," said Mrs. Chubb, "and I ought to have known better. I ought to have known that sending you into a rum affair would only make it rummer. Where's that poor young lady?"

He was so immensely relieved to find from Mrs. Chubb's tone that she had now ranged herself on the side of all the women in the world against him, that he called gaily up the stairs—

"Miss Lambert! Miss Lambert! Show yourself before I go! Mrs. Chubb thinks I've murdered you and hidden the remains in the coal-cellar."

She emerged on the top of the steep, narrow stairs and stood smiling down on them.

"Isn't he a goose, Mrs. Chubb?"

But Mrs. Chubb's fluency had deserted her, and she

was once more fish-like, opening her lips without sound. At last, however, she murmured—

"Kettle's boiling!"

So Unwin was able to depart with the comfortable conviction that Mrs. Chubb and Delia Lambert would wash down the last flavour of brimstone in a friendly cup of tea.

The ladies over their cups naturally discussed him.

"He's a young fool, always up to some prank or another," remarked Mrs. Chubb.

Miss Lambert smiled and shook her head. "Fools can't fool!"

Mrs. Chubb stared, opened her mouth and then placed a bit of bread-and-butter within it. She at once and irrevocably placed her companion in the same class.

Outside in the street Unwin encountered Pauline hurrying towards the house which he had just left, and some vague instinct made him desire to turn her back. He liked Pauline, and he liked Delia, but he felt, quite vaguely, that they were best apart. So he stopped in spite of an absolute lack of encouragement.

"Off to the fortune-teller's, eh?"

But Pauline saw between them the picture of him leaning against the door-post of the Dragon, and so responded nervously—

"Just for the fun of it. I don't really believe . . . Have you been?"

"Yes, but she is off-colour this afternoon, had a slight accident. I would put off going if I were you!"

"Did you have your fortune told?"

"No."

Pauline stood hesitating.

"It was more for Aunt Dickson; she does so want to hear all about the dark room and that. You know how she loves to be *in* things."

"She is. She's the still point in the midst of all the Wendlebury wheels," said Unwin, laughing.

"Oh, she'd be so disappointed, I must go on," said Pauline, taking a new resolution.

So he was obliged to part from her, wondering a little at the aloof constraint of her bow and her manner generally. He began to turn over in his mind all he had said and done in her presence during the past weeks, but he remembered nothing which could by any possibility have given her offence. It worried him intermittently all day, and once when he awoke in the night.

Pauline meanwhile went on feeling quite out of tune for the fortune-telling which had seemed such a joke when she started out. She could only think how sad and incredible was the fact that Unwin drank, and wish there were anything she could do to help him. But the idea of mentioning the subject to him, which she sometimes harboured in his absence, became impossible in his presence. You simply could not, in the face of that pleasant, buoyant friendliness, hand him even a verbal tract.

But the result of all this was that she sat down in the darkened room—which was far less impressive than the palmist's den which she had previously seen in London—and listened with only half an ear to the warnings and promises of her future. Only at the end did she really attend, when the fortune-teller said, smiling—

"You have never cared for a man. But you could!"

"I've never had time, until lately," laughed Pauline, rising. "Perhaps Wendlebury will do it."

Delia had risen now—she was a little taller than Pauline—and had taken off her black cloak. The two women stood together.

"Keep aloof as you are," said Delia suddenly. "That's best. You're like me. You'll know no middle course in love."

Pauline drew herself up, somehow a little offended.

"Thank you so much. It has been delightful."

Then she walked away with her head delicately in the air, and did not notice Miss Amelia, who passed on the other side of the way so veiled and cloaked that the very cat on the sidewalk eyed her suspiciously, knowing it for a disguise.

"Not," as she said wistfully to Delia, five minutes later, "that I expect anything to happen. Only it is rather nice to feel for a little while as if you thought you were expecting something to happen."

And Delia, sore put to it, tried to tell her customer a fairy tale which should cheer the present and not make the future too utterly disappointing. In the middle of it all, Miss Amelia raised a trembling hand.

"Don't tell me if I am to be run over or anything of that kind. I would rather not know. I have not a strong intelligence like my sister and it might prey on my mind."

So Delia reassured her, and she went away feeling adventurous and happy, turning at the last to remark in a confidential tone—

"I believe I saw Miss Pauline Westcott. I do trust you were able to tell her something nice."

"I was," said Delia, smiling.

"I am glad of that," sighed Miss Amelia, relieved. "Miss Pauline is all right with Mrs. Dickson now she is young, but it is rather nice to have some one of your very own when you get older, is it not?"

Then she went away; and Mrs. Chubb also emerging at the same moment with the inevitable bass, the two collided in the narrow passage and reached the street together.

"Oh!" said Miss Amelia in a soft squeak like a rabbit. "You, Mrs. Chubb! I have just been . . . a little matter about a serge skirt." And she was able to satisfy her conscience, because she had indeed prepared a truthful message for the dressmaker in case of such an emergency.

"What did you think of the fortune-teller?" whispered Mrs. Chubb, passing over all that at a bound.

And Miss Amelia, wondering what she did think, suddenly saw.

"I'm sorry for her."

"You needn't be," said Mrs. Chubb, always vaguely ready to discountenance giving, for fear there should somehow be less for her. "People who'll have fried sole one day and bread-and-butter the next . . . Well!"

"I suppose you *can* do nothing for them," agreed Miss Amelia with a sigh.

"What would the world be like if we were all like that?" demanded Mrs. Chubb, annoyed by this latent toleration.

"No. No. But one or two. They seem somehow to make a change," murmured Miss Amelia. "And I don't think they ever get anything out of it for themselves excepting, perhaps, making fun. . . ." Here she became too involved, even for her, and stopped.

"Fun!" said Mrs. Chubb. "That's Mr. Unwin's word. What's the use of fun to anybody? There'll be no fun in heaven!"

But Miss Amelia had been a good deal stirred by her afternoon's adventure, and though she made no reply a wistful thought passed through her mind that she rather hoped there would be; she would rather like a chance to make up for lost time here.

CHAPTER VIII

LADIES IN A CHAR-A-BANC

AUNT DICKSON migrated like the birds every spring, and gained from the journey a like sense of jollity and things beginning well again, though she only went with her chair and her adaptable tortoise from the fireplace to the window, where she sat nodding and smiling at every friend who passed by. Dr. Carter and the news-girl both felt heartened, as one is by swallows coming back, though the doctor was a careworn man knowing too much of life, and the news-girl a cynic with a constant cold in her head who knew too little.

After a while Aunt Dickson raised herself in her chair and stood up, waving her hand to a long, old-fashioned, red-seated char-a-banc which went past filled with ladies. They all waved back to her, sleeves and laces fluttering, dogs barked, the fine rain slanted across the street with an April gleam behind it though this was the first week in May. Miss Amelia, bowing and smiling right and left, remarked: "Dear me! I quite feel as if I were in a procession. I don't know why . . . very foolish. But I have that sort of elated feeling I can imagine our dear Royal family to experience when passing down Constitution Hill."

"What nonsense you talk, Amelia," said Miss Harriet, "and, Pauline, why on earth does Mrs. Dickson not have a bath-chair?"

"She won't," said Pauline; "she hates it!"

"You ought to make her," said Miss Harriet.

"I've tried my best," answered Pauline, "but the only

time I succeeded she was not so well afterwards and Dr. Carter told me to leave her alone."

"Very unreasonable," said Miss Harriet.

Then Unwin leaned forward from his hidden place between the flowing rain-cloaks of Miss Amelia and the Vicar's wife.

"All really nice people have an unreasonable spot somewhere," he said. "My landlady, who is a comparative angel, will sing hymns at 6 a.m. And yet when I told her she was not an angel yet, she gave me notice. She'd always praised the Lord when she was blacking the kitchen grate and always should; so we had to leave it at that, of course."

It must be explained that Unwin was here simply because the Vicar had come to him that morning and had asked him, not ecclesiastically but as one decent, suffering fellow-man to another, how on earth it was possible to turn up at the Rural Dean's with all these women and not a single man, the curate being suddenly obliged to have a tooth extracted. The Rural Dean would not like it, suitable male members of the congregation being specially invited, and in short the Vicar begged Unwin as a personal favour to join the party. Perhaps he was not altogether without guile in mentioning that Miss Pauline Westcott would also view the magnificent show of bulbs which formed the ostensible reason for the expedition, though he mentioned Mary Carter in the same breath and appeared absolutely unconscious that one girl would be more likely to attract Unwin than the other.

Some distance behind the char-a-banc came Chubb's cab, open, bearing Mrs. Delamere in solitary state. This was to show that she had been invited, as she said, "in her own right," and not as a member of the congregation. The honour was shared by Miss Argle who, however, had been obliged to remain at home at the last moment owing to the serious illness of Mr. Argle of Argle Hall.

Miss Harriet, in the char-a-banc, gave this information

somewhat pompously, and added that the invalid was a remarkably clever man . . . believed in nothing . . . all that sort of thing.

"I wonder," said Miss Amelia, "why people who believe in nothing are always considered so clever. Now I should have thought it was much cleverer . . . in these days . . . such awful things happening . . ." But she suddenly realised every one was listening to her and tailed off into an embarrassed silence.

Then the rain cleared, and the ladies took off their cloaks with little pleasant twitterings, like birds after a shower; the Vicar leaned back from the box-seat with quite a jovial, man-of-the-world air, saying it was uncommon pleasant. Unwin looked across at Pauline's vivid face as she talked to breezy, hockey-playing, kindly Mary Carter and thought the same.

"Pity Miss Argle is not here," said the Vicar's wife.

"All the more cakes——" began Miss Amelia and then put her finger on her lip and muttered.

The Vicar's wife naturally looked surprised, and Miss Harriet whispered sharply to her sister—

"Amelia, you are always doing that! It is a dreadful habit: like biting one's nails. Any one might think you were not quite right in your head."

But Miss Amelia clung to this little secret between herself and her Maker and said nothing, though she felt dreadfully uncomfortable.

At last the vehicle turned in at the wide gates and the Rural Dean stood before his handsome doorway, giving an example, as he perhaps meant to do, of the way in which the Church on earth could, with sufficient private means, approach the ideal of those many mansions which the Wendlebury people thought of during public worship and hoped one day to inhabit.

Tea was taken in the spacious hall, where a faded, pretty wife was perhaps too kind, and a tall daughter obviously bored. The Wendlebury ladies grew by degrees very

calm and dignified, even Miss Amelia rising with a little air when the time came to walk among the flower-beds.

"My dear," she said to Pauline, "it will be pleasant to get out into the garden, will it not? Mr. Unwin will perhaps accompany us."

So they all scattered among the lovely beds of parrot and May-flowering tulips bordered with purple aubretia and palest golden polyanthus. Everything was wonderfully fresh and fragrant after the rain, and beyond the hedge of lilac bushes could be seen the grey square tower of a little church a mile and a half away; another, held by the Rural Dean, lay on the far side of the garden.

Security, unheeded, unrealised, or it could not have been so perfect, lay over the whole place like the beautiful spring light for which no one had to be thankful. The Wendlebury ladies in their best dresses stepped along the carefully tended paths, holding their skirts from flowery borders still sprayed with the light shower. A young son of the house was laughing with Mary Carter near a sun-dial which said, "I mark only happy hours." Miss Amelia joined the Vicar, and after a little while Mrs. Delamere came forth, flashing her teeth at the Rural Dean who walked beside her.

A little constraint fell on Unwin and Pauline now they were alone, because since they last met they had thought so much of each other.

"What church is that?" said Pauline, making talk.

"Mardyke. It is a tiny church with a very beautiful old window and a fine monument of a Delamere of the sixteenth century. You ought to see it now you are here." He warmed to his subject. "They're wonderful, these little churches of England. Nothing just like them in the world, standing among the trees and flowers of the churchyards. We shall never really know . . . unless something takes them away from us. Won't you come now and have a look at this one? It's better than bulbs, any day."

She paused.

"All right. I love old village churches, too. There's something so peaceful . . ."

They began to walk along together, and he took out his watch.

"Oh! heaps of time, nearly two hours yet. We shall have to get the key from the village as we go through." He laughed. "Any more ghosts, Miss Pauline?"

"No. Dear Miss Amelia!"

So they talked together of simple things, gathering a few late primroses under the hedge and looking at a bird's nest carefully, with peering faces near together, and gay hushed voices.

There was a charm about Pauline to-day, a sort of sexless freshness, which made this walk seem to Unwin like going back to boyhood. And indeed she had been singularly untouched by the usual girlish experiences during her life in London. She worked very hard from morning to night, and her thoughts were full of work, and she never had much trouble with the "questing beast" which is supposed by some to lurk within most male employers of female labour. It may have put its nose forth now and then—the world being the world—but it perhaps sniffed Pauline's aloof virginity and retired. Any way she remained untouched though not ignorant.

This aloofness or elusiveness also puzzled Unwin though it did not repel him, because Wendlebury had changed Pauline and she was now less like a will-o'-the-wisp and more like a steady lamp in a far window guiding somebody home. It was home Unwin thought of as they stood by the cottage door while the woman looked for the key.

"It isn't here," she said. "I'll send to the carpenter's for it. He had it mending the pulpit. My girl'll be after you in a minute."

But they had looked at all the tombstones grown round with violets and forget-me-nots before a heavy-looking girl of fifteen came towards them, remarking stolidly:

"I've unlocked the door. I'll wait here till you've done." And she sat down on a flat stone in the sunshine.

The pleasant, coloured twilight falling through the East window and through the little plain old windows set high in the stone walls seemed solemn to Pauline after the flowers and the blue sky. She watched Unwin with a sort of pricking interest and curiosity as he stood looking about the church, the light on his keen face and steady eyes. If she had not herself seen him outside the Dragon doorway in his tumbled dress clothes she could never have believed him guilty: any suspicion not founded on absolute fact must have vanished like a dream at this moment.

As it was, she felt a sudden overwhelming kindness and pity. She must help him. She would help him. But how?

Something deep within her answered, by believing in him; by making him wish to retain that belief unshadowed; by never letting him glimpse the passing of a shadow . . .

He was speaking to her from the old choir seats.

"Look at these; they're grotesque enough. But the chap who carved them *meant* it . . . it wasn't just for money. He felt jolly the day he did that grinning face. He liked doing it. I can just see him, can't you? Good old chap!"

Unwin passed his hand across the wood with a queer sort of affection and fellowship; he seemed to be greeting a brother across all the years. They both knew what it was to love the work, not the end of the work only. He had almost forgotten Pauline.

"You'd have liked to live then?" she said.

He came back to her, straightening himself.

"No, no. It's splendid being in this age; better than it ever has been, if you like to make it so."

She understood, having also been a worker.

"If you've great luck, and are very strong, perhaps," she said. Then she smiled. "Anyway, you'll have both

the joy in work and the reward, with Lord Southwater."

"Yes." He looked round. "This church is the very one he will want me to start on, I expect, if I get the job. The structure is giving in the chancel and he has promised to restore it."

"You're certain to get the post," said Pauline. "The Vicar told Aunt Dickson how much he liked you."

"Well"—he walked towards the door—"I can't stay in Wendlebury as I am, that's certain. I came because my poor old Dad wrote for me from London when he was beginning to fail and couldn't bear to see the business given up, not realising, somehow, that it had given him up. He was a fine architect, but there is no scope for one now in this neighbourhood. But even if Lord Southwater does not appoint me, I have another string to my bow."

"What is that?" said Pauline, emerging into the little green churchyard where the girl still sat stolidly half-asleep on her tombstone.

"A man I knew in London when I was studying has offered me a partnership abroad."

The waving trees, the green graves, the flowers; they were all printed on Pauline's mind so to remain until she forgot everything. She did not want him to go. With a sudden, startled recognition of her own feeling, she knew that England would never be the same with him not in it. Yet it seemed so ridiculous that one man, almost a stranger, could change England. She pushed the thought aside.

"Well, there's no fear of that. You won't have to go," she said lightly.

"I want you to see an old cross by the gate," he said, leaving the subject. And they talked again, as they had done in coming, of little things which did not matter and which matched the pleasant day.

At last he took out his watch.

"I say! It is nearly time to go," he exclaimed. "But

I must show you the Delamere monument. It stands in what is now the vestry, so I forgot."

"Fancy forgetting what we really came to see!" said Pauline, laughing.

So they passed the girl, apparently asleep on her stone in the sunshine, and once more entered the church. The sixteenth-century Delamere and his wife, with sons and daughters in a lessening row, were now hidden from the worshippers by a cheap red cloth curtain patterned in black, behind which cheeky choir boys donned their surplices.

Pauline looked at the kneeling woman on the church wall.

"So *that's* what it all comes to!"

Unwin smiled at her.

"You know it doesn't."

They seemed nearer together than had yesterday appeared possible, as they walked down the aisle of the church.

"You've liked it?" said Unwin, his hand on the great iron latch of the door.

"Yes," said Pauline . . . and that was all she did say.

"Will you come with me to Ryecroft Church some afternoon?" he asked, with his hand still on the latch. Then his tone changed and he said sharply—

"By Jove! She's locked us in!"

"Never!" said Pauline, also tugging at the door handle. But they forgot their dismay as their fingers touched. A warm thrill tingled suddenly in every nerve. They drew apart, laughing and with flushed faces.

"No go!" said Unwin. "But the girl is sure to come back in a minute to fetch her tip. It's that she was hanging about for, of course."

"But why did she lock the door? That is what I can't understand," said Pauline.

"Oh, she'd wake up and look into the church and think we had sneaked off without giving her anything. This

is rather a show place in a small way and I daresay she has been caught like that before," said Unwin. "It would be while we looked at the monument in the vestry."

"What?" said Pauline. "Good gracious! Then that means she *won't* come back! We're here for the night."

"Nonsense! Somebody will miss us when the char-a-banc goes back to Wendlebury," said Unwin.

"But they won't know where to find us. Oh dear! just fancy what they'll all say!"

"I can't," said Unwin.

"Anyway, we shall be found at the early service in the morning."

"There are no early services. Only one a fortnight," said Unwin. There was a moment's blank silence, then Pauline said lightly: "How long did that starving champion go without food? What man has done, woman can do." But the feeble jest fell like an irreverence on the cloistered air. Pauline suddenly realised that she felt tired out and sat down in a pew. Unwin sat by her. The church grew more and more shadowy as the spring day drew to a close.

The char-a-banc and Chubb's cab stood on the wide, gravelled space before the fine doorway of the Rural Dean, who was ushering forth the Wendlebury ladies in a splendid glow of duty done. As parson, host, father, husband and man-of-the-world, he had given a shining exemplar of what could be achieved by goodness, and he was about to be rewarded in this present by dining with the Bracegirdles, where the entrées were beyond praise. But it was already a little late and his wife wished to dress, while his daughter had already retired for that purpose, so he was speeding the parting guests with a sort of jovial pomposity.

"Delighted, my dear fellow, delighted," he said to the Vicar, while alertly aiding the Vicar's wife to enter the char-a-banc. "Hope to see you all again when the roses

are at their best. Good-bye, Mrs. Delamere. Good-bye. So pleased!"

"Are we all here? Where's Unwin?" said the Vicar.

"Pauline!" murmured Miss Amelia.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the Vicar; "what is to be done?" And he felt acutely uncomfortable, for the Rural Dean had twice tactfully informed him of the dinner engagement.

"Let us search the garden," suggested Mary Carter. So she and the young son of the house ran about among the walks and flower beds, to return breathless with the news that neither Pauline nor Unwin were to be found.

"Disgraceful behaviour!" said Miss Harriet.

"I never cared much for that girl," said Mrs. Delamere.

"But perhaps it is not the girl's fault," said the Vicar.

"Almost always is, in these cases," snapped the Vicar's wife. "I know at Sunday-school treats . . ."

"If you compare us . . ." began Miss Harriet, very dignified.

"Oh! I don't! I don't!" said the Vicar's wife. "Only I am so bothered. We can't possibly stay on here any longer when we know they are dying to get rid of us."

Then Miss Amelia bent forward, rather flushed, with a new suggestion.

"Why not ask Mrs. Delamere to ride with us and leave Chubb's cab behind, ready for when they do turn up?"

The Rural Dean, who had been anxiously listening, drew a long breath. He thought Miss Amelia a charming, sensible woman.

"I only wish," he said, "that I could offer our car. But we are using it this evening. Would you kindly do this, Mrs. Delamere?" For that lady sat very straight, pretending not to hear and looking very truculent.

"Let them walk," she said, wishing to show that no cleric could dictate to a sister-in-law of Lord Southwater.

"Of course, of course," murmured the Rural Dean, mindful of a split in the west wall of his own church that

would need looking after before long. But he was very much bothered and glanced at his wife, who was still being tiredly effusive in face of all odds.

Then Miss Amelia made an unexpected move that changed the whole situation. She got up in the char-a-banc, stumbled between knees to the step, and announced that if Chubb didn't stay, she would, and wild horses should not induce her to do otherwise.

But Mrs. Delamere remained obdurate, saying in a very grand tone to Chubb: "Pray drive on!"

Then it was Chubb who provided the sensation. All his old scores against Mrs. Delamere rose to his mind and he saw a chance of revenge with all Wendlebury and the Rural Deanery to back him up. It was not in human nature to forgo the opportunity. He got down from his box and stood by Griselda's head, saying stolidly—

"I brefer to stop!"

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Delamere.

"I brefer to stop," he repeated.

"Insolent creature!" cried his fare, alighting agitatedly.

"Thank you. So very kind of you," soothed the poor Vicar, assisting her into the char-a-banc.

The coachman flourished his whip, the hostess and host smiled again, splendid to the last, the Wendlebury ladies waved a grateful farewell through which Miss Amelia remarked in an apologetic tone to Mrs. Delamere—

"I do hope you will forgive me. I had to do it on Pauline's account. After all, it will not matter so much what time she comes home in Chubb's cab. One always feels that Chubb is so trustworthy."

But the lady addressed did not reply; she wrapped herself in the mantle of all the Delameres and remained speechless until she arrived at her own door.

It was almost dark now in the church, and Pauline and her companion sat in moody and fatigued silence.

They had just been trying every door and window for the sixth time, but the little upper windows with their stone mullions could not be passed through by any human being over the age of two, and Unwin had decided to discuss the advisability of breaking the old stained East window.

"Then you think more of an old window than you do of me," said Pauline sharply.

"I do," said Unwin, which shows where they had arrived.

"If no one comes, I shall break the old thing myself," said Pauline, starting up.

He caught hold of her.

"No, you won't. And I don't believe you could squeeze through the mullions if you did."

She pulled herself away feeling nothing but annoyance, while Unwin had a strange, passing desire to hold her roughly . . . hurt her. It was gone in a moment, but he experienced on the top of it a sort of shocked astonishment at having known it.

"You must think of something; you *must*," she said, staring angrily at him through the gloom.

He left her, and wandered round the church very gloomily by himself, peering and poking everywhere without result. But as he was passing under the tower, where it was already dark, for the tenth time, he felt the bell rope hit him on the face. He cursed the bell rope, though in a sacred place, and saw stars: then he saw something else. Illumination spread from those receding stars and he seized the bell-rope.

Clang! Clang! Clang! immediately rang out through the still church, and across the country fields in the twilight.

"Oh!" called Pauline, running towards Unwin; "why on earth didn't you think of that before?"

"If it comes to that . . . why didn't you?"

Then they sat down once more and waited. Nothing

happened. He rang again, and this time there soon came a clattering of feet outside, the sound of people calling, the turn of the key in the door. They emerged, blinking, from the pitch darkness into the spring night outside. And there stood Chubb, solid upon a moving background of village people bearing sticks and lanterns.

"Cab's waiting," he said.

"Well!" gasped Pauline. The two released persons gazed at each other. A long man surged forth from the crowd armed with a hay rake.

"We thought something had happened . . . robbers . . . fire . . . we didn't know. Church-bell's never rung at that time afore in my life."

"Nor in mine," piped an old woman from behind in a print bonnet.

"It was your son's Agnes locked 'em in. They've no business to let that soft lass have the key," said the first speaker.

It was all oddly mediæval, this scene round the old church, with the moving lanterns and the shapeless garments too dimly seen to be very different from those worn long ago, and the country faces and voices. An old man with a big nose and bent rheumatic limbs like a figure from Teniers or Ostade leered at Pauline out of the shadows, holding his lantern high.

"A bonny lass, he! he! A bonny lass! Agnes were none so soft. She mun lock me in wi' this yere lass any day. He! he!"

"Chubb!" cried Pauline, clinging somehow desperately in him to the solid present. "How did you come here?"

"Miss Amelia told me to stop behind till you come. But you didn't come. Then the chap in the parson's stables and me, we heard the bell, and he says 'Something's up!' So I says if something's up you may be bound Mr. Unwin's in it. So I comes along."

"But Mrs. Delamere?" said Unwin, opening the cab

door. "I say, Miss Westcott, hadn't you better get in?"

"Mrs. Delamere," replied Chubb, "was all for leaving you. But Miss Amelia she ups and she says, either she stops or I does. And Mrs. Delamere says in her haughty way like: 'Drive on!' So then I puts in my word. 'I brefer to stop,' I says; and nothing wouldn't make me say no other. 'I brefer to stop,' I says."

"Well!" chuckled the old man again, "here's a lot of fuss about a young chap having a bit of a lark . . . if it was me going to spend the night in our old church with a bonny lass like her, I shouldn't trouble . . ."

"Get in," commanded Unwin, propelling Pauline through the cab door.

"But I can't think how Miss Amelia dared do it," said she, as he followed her in after bestowing gratuities. "Tackle Mrs. Delamere, I mean. It's like a mouse going for a large, green-eyed cat!"

Chubb, turning the door-handle, was also able to answer this question.

"I heard her say I was a sort of sign everything was all proper," he remarked. "She gave out as I shouldn't stand any larky goings on in my cab, nor shouldn't I."

"Chaperon, in fact," said Unwin. "But, surely, Chubb, she was thinking of Grisel. Venus and a stockbroker might go to the moon under her wing in perfect propriety. We all know that."

Just then Griselda gave a careless flick of her tail as one who says, "I *am* good, I don't know why." Chubb got on the box-seat, the long man waved his rake, and the senile spark held high his lantern, cackling out, "If I had nobbut an old shoe and a bit o' rice, he! he!"

Unwin and Pauline beamed from the side windows, laughing, excited, though they did not realise why they felt that odd thrill of excited pleasure.

"Good-bye! Good-bye!"

And the people, moving about between the flowery grasses, called back: "Good-bye! Good luck!"

For they too felt as if they had just seen youth and hope go by with a sort of wedding jollity.

Perhaps it was the association of ideas which made Unwin take Pauline's hand in his and ask, laughing—

"I say, hasn't it been a joke?"

"But poor Miss Amelia!"

"And the Vicar! Never mind, we'll go round to-morrow and make love to Miss Amelia. She has been an old dear."

The "we" was perhaps a little intoxicating. He pressed the supple fingers closer.

"Do you know, the first thing I noticed about you was your hands . . . your pretty hands . . ."

Pauline withdrew the one he was holding and moved away.

"Of course you'll have to go round and explain to the Vicar."

After which nothing of import was said until they reached Aunt Dickson's door, where they parted lightly under the chaperonage of Chubb.

Aunt Dickson looked up concerned as Pauline entered the room.

"Oh, I am so thankful you are safely back. I have had Miss Amelia and Mr. Belclamere in. What *has* happened?"

Pauline sat down and related her tale. It was less vivid than usual and Aunt Dickson noticed the difference with increasing dismay. Surely, she thought, the girl is not falling in love with young Unwin. Aloud, she said impulsively—

"I'd rather it had been any one else!"

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Aunt Dickson hesitated. "Well, I don't want you to have the job of reforming a drunkard."

"I shall not have the chance," said Pauline. "And he is not a drunkard. The bare term in connection with Mr. Unwin is ridiculous. It is only that he . . . sometimes . . ."

She looked across more wistfully than she knew, and Aunt Dickson's big face grew very grave and sad, with a deep sadness and gravity such as was seldom seen in it.

"Pauline," she said, speaking with a visible effort, "I married a man like that, thinking I was going to help him. He threw me downstairs in one of his drunken fits and that is why I am like this."

"Aunt Dickson! Oh! I never knew. I never knew," said Pauline, almost in a whisper.

"Nobody knows. He was never a notorious drunkard. But I love you like my own daughter so I have told you."

Pauline slipped across the hearth and hid her face in Aunt Dickson's lap, kissing the veined old hands. She could not say anything. At last she lifted up her head.

"To think God lets such things happen to people like you!" she said, brushing away fierce, hot tears.

But Aunt Dickson was always ready to give her Maker credit for kindness and common sense.

"I don't believe the Lord had much to do with it," she answered. "I think it was more likely port wine after whooping cough at fifteen and an over-indulgent mother. But we won't speak of it any more, Pauline." She paused. "And so Mrs. Carter wore her plum colour? I always think she looks well in that."

Thus the door closed again upon that locked chamber of Aunt Dickson's heart which she had painfully forced open for a moment out of love for Pauline, and they talked a little of ordinary simple matters.

But no sooner was Pauline safely in her bedroom alone with her own urging, disturbing thoughts at last, when Eva knocked at the door.

"The Missus has sent you a glass of hot milk. I'm to see you take it."

Pauline sighed and opened the door, and Eva entered briskly.

"Well! You do look done up," she remarked.

"I am very tired," said Pauline. "I shall go straight to bed."

But Eva did not retire.

"Look here," she said; "you take it all too serious. Nobody'll think a penny the worse of you, Miss. I'm sure I don't!"

"That's nice of you," said Pauline, smiling.

"Not a bit of it, Miss," said Eva. "Us Martins always was oners for romanch. We don't believe in tittle-tattling about sweethearts and spoiling a girl's game. I shall ever remember the clout over the ear my poor Mother gave our Bill for saying out before everybody at tea, 'Who kissed Cock Robin?' meaning Uncle Robin that afterwards married Aunt Susan, and now they have two pairs of twins and an odd boy with a squint in his left eye." She sighed. "Ay, we owe a lot to my poor Mother."

What could Pauline say in the face of that? Nothing. She sat down and drank the hot milk, responding suitably to questions about the tea, the garden, the ladies' dresses and the attitude of Chubb.

CHAPTER IX

DELIA'S PARTY

AUNT DICKSON beamed from her window like a jolly red sun on a wintry morning, for she had found a new joy in life. To the tortoise bell which regulated the life of the house she had now added a portable telephone instrument which enabled her to keep a finger, as it were, on the pulse of all Wendlebury Town. True, the Misses Pritchard and other ladies were not "on," but it was splendid to hear once more the muffled voice of Binns the fishmonger and to order, without an intermediary, the joint for Sunday's dinner. She stocked the larder to overflowing that morning with an excited, rollicking sense of being "in it" again which left her breathless and satisfied. She experienced that satisfaction in having shopped well which is a perverse survival of a time when women depended on their own exertions for the provisioning of the household.

So, deeply feeling she had baked and spun, though knowing otherwise, Aunt Dickson sat back in her great chair and watched the passers-by. Pauline leaned engrossed over her translating. The scented flowery silence was accentuated by the light rush and crackle of a wood fire which gave out cheerfulness without too much heat. Then—Cling! and Aunt Dickson's ear was at the receiver.

"It is for you, Pauline. Mr. Unwin? Yes. So nice having the telephone."

She gave up the receiver; and Pauline felt vividly conscious of the big, inert figure, sitting there in the sunlight.

"Oh! Not at all tired, thank you. No: I'm afraid I

can't . . . Very busy just now. What a lovely day! Good-bye!"

She put back the receiver and turned to Aunt Dickson.

"He wanted me to cycle out with him to Ryeford Magna. We'd been talking about the church there. I said I couldn't find time."

"I'm glad, Pauline."

"Oh, but—that's only *me*. I do so wish I could help him."

Aunt Dickson shook her head and said nothing, while Pauline went back to her book; for she also, looking at that maimed woman, felt there was nothing to say. But she found it very difficult to keep her mind on her work, and her delicate, longish face with the pointed chin, lovely mouth and dark eyes, had a brooding look, elusive; the will-o'-the-wisp again emerging. The will-o'-the-wisp that would light the pork-butcher's shop.

Unwin hung up the receiver and walked to the window of his private office where he stared out for some time at a cat on the next roof. So that was it, was it? He might as well know before things went any further. After all, there were moments when he disliked her; in the church, for instance, when he was wandering about in the dark and banging his eye with a bellrope. It was foolish to fall in love with a girl who aggravated you so; no foundation for a happy married life there.

Then his reflections abruptly took a fresh turn and a beautiful light, like sudden sunshine, relieved their dullness. Of course, the old woman was in the room. No doubt Pauline had been shy and did not like to make an appointment under the nose of Aunt Dickson.

Whistling, he sat down to his table and began to jot down what ought to be done in the little church where he and Pauline had been imprisoned. It would all help when Lord Southwater went over the place with him, and would add, no doubt, to the favourable opinion which

that excellent peer already entertained of his abilities.

After a while, he began to chuckle as he sketched. Chubb . . . the crowd outside . . . What a lark that all was, to be sure! And the ride home—his pencil ceased moving—the ride home. But he could not recover what he had felt in holding her slim fingers, and his one thought was to be near her again.

In consequence of this, he went that same evening to call upon Delia Lambert. But Pauline would have been astonished and even pained had she known that her telephone message would produce this effect. For there is one mystery locked away from the female sex; no girl will ever really understand that a man's love for a woman whom he can't see, will send him to see another whom he does not love. Thus while Pauline avoided promiscuous male society and remained intolerant of the new curate, Unwin entered a confectioner's shop, purchased a box of chocolates and made his way with a certain eagerness to the little house near the Bowling Green Inn, telling himself that it was a tribute to the memory of poor Delamere.

In answer to his knock, the dressmaker-landlady opened the door, munching, with fingers pressed upon her mouth to support her new false teeth. "'Scuse! Good evening, Mr. Unwin."

"Is Miss Lambert at home?" said Unwin, realising the curiosity in the woman's eyes with a faint feeling of embarrassment.

"She is not open to professional engagements this evening. I presume it is the fortune-telling?"

"N-no," said Unwin. Then he heard with relief Delia Lambert's voice from the interior. "That you, Mr. Unwin? Oh, come in! Do come in."

"Of course . . . I was not aware . . . Any personal friend," murmured the dressmaker, ushering Unwin into the room.

Delia sat at the head of the table and the dressmaker

had evidently just risen from a seat on her right hand. A bunch of white lilac was surrounded by the pink and green and silver of salmon and cucumber, by the pale gold of delicately roasted chicken, by the heaped rose of early strawberries, by a jar of foie gras. Unwin remembered his last interview and felt naturally astonished, though endeavouring to concentrate his mind upon the weather.

"Yes, delightful," said Delia staidly; then her lips twitched and she began to laugh. "It's no good, Mr. Unwin. You behave so perfectly, but even you are unable to ignore such a banquet in a room twelve feet by ten. Now, honestly, tell me what you think it all means? And sit down, Miss Walker. Go? Of course you can't go. No lady ever left a party in the middle; and besides, I want you. And Mr. Unwin is to have this chair on my left. Now then! What do you think of it?"

As she leaned forward he saw that her face was even more lined than he had thought, yet in spite of high cheek bones, blunt nose and restless eyes, it remained oddly attractive.

"What do I think?" he said, smiling. "Why, that you and Miss Walker are doing yourselves uncommonly well."

"We're having a party," said Delia. "Miss Walker has been so kind to me that I wanted to try and return a little, though one can never return a kindness."

"No." Unwin too smiled at the little woman opposite. "That's a good thing we have to keep."

"Not at all . . . 'scuse . . . only mentioning the palmistry here and there," said Miss Walker.

"But Mr. Unwin still feels uneasy," mocked Delia. "He is an upright, respectable citizen who has never known the adventurous joy of buying what he can see no means of paying for, and he fears we shall get into trouble, Miss Walker."

"I'm sure I never owed a penny. Father's guiding principle," murmured Miss Walker, rather annoyed.

"I know what happened," said Unwin soothingly. "Miss Lambert rubbed her crystal like a person in a fairy tale and the banquet appeared. It does taste a bit of brimstone, doesn't it, Miss Walker?"

"Perhaps, Miss Lambert," said the dressmaker, drawing herself up, "it would be better to inform Mr. Unwin that you have had a legacy left you, and that these are the—er—proceeds."

"That's it," said Delia. "My grandfather has died and cut me off with fifty pounds for mourning and an insult. So I am going to have some real fun out of it, just to spite him."

"After all, fifty pounds is a very nice sum," said the dressmaker, a little wistfully. "It takes a lot of earning, especially when you begin to get on in life like me."

"You getting on! You haven't a grey hair," said Delia, with careless good-nature. "Ask the local preacher with the bump over his right eye what *he* thinks?"

"Past all that," said the dressmaker, but she gave a giggle reminiscent of her lost youth.

"Nonsense!" said Unwin gallantly. "A woman is as old as she looks, you know."

"Well," said Miss Walker, "perhaps you are right. "There's Mrs. Delamere now . . . I was working for her yesterday . . . how she wears! But she was a good deal bothered about Lord Southwater."

"Why?" said Unwin rather eagerly.

"He is ill in bed with—'scuse! a bad attack of bronchitis."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Unwin. But a sudden sense of lightness and relief made him realise that he was glad to hear it, and that a little anxiety in regard to Lord Southwater's silence had gradually been creeping across the clear horizon of the future. It was not definite enough to be called a fear, but the possibility of fear had been there. Now all was explained, and he could await the recovery of the invalid with an easy mind.

So Unwin's spirits went up with a bound and the little party became a very merry one, while the little dressmaker began to feel that she was still a fascinating woman, though undoubtedly mature, and that there was something about her which might have turned the heads of all Wendlebury, had she developed it earlier in life. At cigarettes, however, she drew the line, retiring to oversew a bodice and to think of a Sunday-school treat long ago, when a gentleman rather like Unwin had said to her: "You resemble a fairy in that white frock." As a matter of fact the gentleman was no more like Unwin than Miss Walker was like a fairy; it was just one of those dreams given to women by a heavenly kindness which has regard to their deep capacity for love, and will not let them know themselves as they are.

When she had gone, Unwin and Delia sat down on either side of the fire.

"Well," said Delia, putting her feet on the fender, "I must own it is nice to feel once more that life is a lark to somebody."

"I didn't feel it when I came in," said Unwin. "The party has cheered me up too."

"Has it?" said Delia, watching the smoke go upwards from her cigarette. "Sometimes I feel like the man who committed suicide because life was all buttoning and unbuttoning. It seems sometimes all getting down-hearted and cheering up again. But I have been ill and miserable."

"You're better now?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. I shall keep quiet here for a few weeks, and then I shall be all right. The air is so lovely; and I mean to spend part of the fifty pounds on Chubb's cab, as I can't walk far."

"That will do you good," said Unwin. Then he added: "I say, isn't it queer that I should have chanced to be with poor Delamere at the last, and now I appear likely

to get this appointment with Lord Southwater? How his pride would be injured if he knew the whole story."

"Well, he never will know it. We are neither of us likely to go back on a dead man who can't speak for himself," said Delia. "But I am glad you are getting the job. After what you did for one brother, it is only just that you should derive some benefit from the other."

"Oh, I did very little. But Southwater would never give me the post if he knew. His pride would be constantly galled by seeing me," said Unwin.

"Are you afraid I shall tell?" said Delia, looking straight at him. "I promise you I won't, if that eases your mind."

"I'm not afraid," said Unwin.

Then they talked in low voices of the dead man, and about eleven o'clock Unwin departed. It was a fine, starry night, and he strolled past Pauline's house, though it was not on his way home. As he went by, a light shone out from the upper storey, and he felt that stirring of the heart which all lovers know beneath their lady's window, which is as commonplace as the chirping of a sparrow to its mate, and as deeply a part of our common life.

Chubb stood in his kitchen waiting for Mrs. Chubb to bring his best hat, while Griselda flicked her tail meditatively before the open door. The sound of the cabman's heavy voice came out to her, blustering, angry, finally a sort of bellow. But she only flicked her tail: for, friendly or furious, he was still her Chubb.

Mrs. Chubb, within, wore an expression which denoted the same sentiments, but there remained elsewhere about her mental attitude an impalpable something which could not be defined, but which was not in Griselda's.

"You great silly!" shouted Chubb. "You can't have *eaten* my best hat! And this house isn't Buckinerm Palace. Find it."

"I have looked," said Mrs. Chubb, screwing up her

mouth. "I can't find it. You don't want it as bad as all that, until Sunday comes."

"I want it now and I'll have it," retorted Chubb. "But things has got to a pretty pass in this house—me having to find my own things myself!"

He lumbered up the stairs, but Mrs. Chubb remained at the bottom, opening and shutting her mouth like a fish; her face was white but desperate. It did indeed seem to her a terrible thing that she should be driven to allow Chubb to fetch his own best hat. In a moment he emerged from the bedroom bearing the hat.

"It was under the bed all the time!"

Mrs. Chubb turned away with her hand to her heart.

"What time shall you be back?"

"Oh, Miss Lambert said about a couple of hours."

"It's every day this week."

"Yes. She's a lady now. She knows how to tip and to treat a man," said Chubb.

"I dessay," said Mrs. Chubb, then opened her mouth, closed it again and thought better. "I suppose some quiet country road. That was what she told you last time, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I think I shall take her round Narcross and home by Ryeford. Bluebells is coming out in Narcross woods."

He got on his box as he spoke and Mrs. Chubb exchanged a glance with Griselda. They knew, they knew! The hussy!

"I dessay you tell her all about the neighbourhood," said Mrs. Chubb innocently. "She'll be asking you questions about things, Chubby. You're such a clever man!"

"Ay; I tell her the points of interest . . . I tell her the points of interest," said Chubb. "Gee-up!"

Griselda flicked her tail in mute sympathy as she demurely trotted on and Mrs. Chubb returned to the house, where she stood for a long time quite still by the window, listening to the sound of Griselda's footsteps until they

died away. A silvery silence hung over the little town, the grey clouds being illuminated by a distant sunlight, high up, which did not shine through them. Then a cart rattled by and Mrs. Chubb, seemingly roused to some desperate activity, put on her jacket and hat and fled through by-ways to the Ryecroft Road. She was unaccustomed to pedestrian exercise and began to pant by the time she emerged upon the green fields, but that did not deter her for more than the few moments required to gather strength and speed on again.

At last she heard the familiar clop! clop! of Griselda in the distance and instantly slipped behind a hedge. The field chanced to be that in which the scarecrow waved warning arms, and Mrs. Chubb was so excited that she thought it was the farmer ordering her away, but she called back desperately over her shoulder: "You may shout and wave until you bust yourself, but I *will* see what's going on."

She crouched down as the cab came nearer—her view was interrupted by the twigs. She cautiously peered above the hedge, saw Delia in the cab, and instantly disappeared again.

"Chubb!" called Delia excitedly from the road. "Stop! Stop! A tramp has just fallen down behind that hedge!"

Mrs. Chubb heard in a whirlwind of fury and apprehension. A tramp! But if Chubb found her there, what would he do to her? He would never forgive her in this world.

Her thoughts ran round and round like rats in a trap, as she crouched in the ditch among dead leaves that rattled. Dead leaves . . . dead leaves . . . babes in the wood. . . . An inspiration came to her.

Delia ran across the road to look over the hedge, and Chubb followed more slowly. Mrs. Chubb, through a chink in her heap of leaves, saw their heads close together as they peered over, and she ground her teeth in impotent indignation. How handsome her Chubb looked! What a splendid figure of a man. No wonder . . .

"Well!" said Delia, drawing back. "This is queer. I most certainly saw a hat."

"It's been fancy," said Chubb, turning away.

Mrs. Chubb, however, was trembling to such an extent that the sparse leaves ceased to cover her, and Delia exclaimed again—

"I am certain it is a tramp. I see an old boot!"

"Old boots is common enough," grunted Chubb, going back to his cab.

"But it waggled," protested Delia, hurrying along the road under the shadow of the hedge.

"Fancy," said Chubb.

"I'm sure I saw a boot," said Delia. "You could fancy a face, perhaps, but not a boot."

"Women can fancy anything. Get in, Mum," said Chubb. "Gee-up!"

And Mrs. Chubb, wet through from the mud in the ditch, exhausted after her long walk, and almost fainting with nervous agitation, yet had a moment of relief so intense that it seemed almost like beatitude as she heard the cab roll away down the Ryeford Road.

After a few moments she got up, brushed off as much mud as possible, and plodded by devious ways home to a situation which, though less terrible than it might have been, was still unparalleled in the annals of the Chubbs. Mr. Chubb was reduced, after waiting a whole half-hour, to the horrible necessity of getting his own tea ready. His back, as Mrs. Chubb passed the window, expressed something of what he felt about that. Cautiously, gently she opened the door.

"Chubby!" she bleated.

Then he turned. Then the pent-up storm burst. He prided himself on never laying a finger on a woman, and nobly he kept to that resolution now. When his expressions of just anger became reproduceable he was shouting like some overwhelming Neptune with a piece of smoking toast on his trident.

"Out! Out a-walking! When I wanted my tea!"

"I'm very sorry, Chubb," said she, sinking into a chair.

"Then what was you doing? What excuse have you to make?"

"I haven't none," said she dully, staring at her muddy boots. "I—I wanted a bit of fresh air."

"And this," said Chubb, addressing the universe, "is what I get for being a faithful married husband twenty year! No wonder marrying's going out o' fashion."

Mrs. Chubb made no reply. She could, as she exhaustedly reflected, manage a day's washing against anybody, but sleuth-hunting was too much for her.

Next morning, still feeling the effects of this novel experience, she went to clean at the house where Delia Lambert lodged, and, being late, encountered the little dressmaker just starting forth with fashion papers and bag upon the day's work. Often and often Mrs. Chubb had paused on the way, determining not to come, and then urged forward by that curiosity of jealousy which drives cleverer people than the cabman's wife into much more distasteful actions than cleaning out the sitting-room of the hated rival.

"Then," said the dressmaker, "you'll do the sitting-room while Miss Lambert is out driving this afternoon?"

Mrs. Chubb opened her mouth, closed it, swallowed, and answered, "Yes."

"It's a real good job for Chubb," pursued the dressmaker, conscious of having introduced a valuable customer. "Miss Lambert is generous with her money when she has any. I've no doubt she behaves well to him."

"Neither have I," said Mrs. Chubb, screwing her lips tight and walking into the house.

CHAPTER X

A COUNTRY WALK

A YOUNG man in Wendlebury who desires to see a young woman has but to place himself near the little table in the confectioner's window and the chance will come. So—the shop being a busy one and the few tables in request, which does not allow of their continued occupation by non-consumers—it is simply a question whether love or digestion first gives out. Unwin's excellent internal organs had already begun slightly to feel the strain of cheese-cakes, bath-buns and other solid dainties compounded here from recipes dating back to eighteen fifty, when he at last espied Pauline by the counter ordering that almond pound cake for which the shop remained justly famous.

It was already about six o'clock, but he jumped up from his seat and hurried round a fragrant pile of spicy, sugary buns, exclaiming with fervour—

"Do come and take pity on my loneliness. I am just going to begin and I do so hate having tea alone."

Pauline hesitated, looking at a crisp mound of Ladies' Fingers, but seeing Aunt Dickson's face as it was that evening after the ride home in Chubb's cab from Marcross Church. Poor Aunt Dickson . . . how little any one guessed that her life held such a tragedy. . . .

"Do come," urged Unwin.

Then Pauline looked at him intently.

And as she looked, she made up her mind to marry him if he asked her. Her emotions so long latent and controlled suddenly burst forth into a great flower of hope

and desire. She felt the perfume of it surround them both as she walked towards the table. Her love seemed strong enough to carry both of them up into the heavens, past all weakness and all sin. But it left her also ready to suffer . . . to suffer terribly . . . to almost welcome agony if it were helping him.

The little cake-scented shop swam in a sort of haze; it was a wonderful moment in her life . . . unforgettable . . .

Then the moment passed and she heard herself saying in a high, trembling voice which she scarcely recognised—

"Yes, I should like some tea."

But they both knew that tea-time had long gone past and the shopwoman also knew it; so there was quite a glow of young romance about the tray which she presently set before them. She had added a little dish of melting, delicious pink-and-white sugar biscuits called Lovers' Kisses, such as were generally supplied only at dances and weddings and such-like festivals, because she was all unconsciously a poet—though she was fat and tight-busted and rosy-cheeked—and had a beautiful desire to pay tribute to young love.

Both Unwin and Pauline felt the charm of the narrow little place where the rich plenty of butter and cream and eggs from the green fields round Wendlebury had been transformed into things delicious to eat during the past seventy years by women who had pride and joy in their work. It was the poetry of restaurant keeping which these lovers sensed in nibbling Lovers' Kisses and talking about the weather.

But after a while the kind shopwoman retired to a corner and feigned to be sorting gingerbreads into a tall glass jar. So Unwin bent forward across the table and said quickly—

"You wouldn't come with me to Ryeford. Why not?"

"Aunt Dickson——" murmured Pauline. "I don't like to leave her too much alone."

"It is a lovely church," he said. "I believe I may have something to do there when Marcross is finished."

"But would you not rather build a church outright?" said Pauline, speaking at random. "In the future nobody will ever know you did anything if you only repair and restore and beautify. *You* get lost!"

"That's just——" he began. But he could not yet explain to her how he felt about that; he did not even, as it were, mention the matter to himself. But the whole of his own work was inspired by the thought of those brothers of his in the past who had added and beautified and been forgotten, and yet must be gloriously remembered so long as tower and steeple stand among clustering English villages.

A silence fell between them; one of those odd silences which happen when certain words crowd round waiting to be spoken and no others will come. A time of miserable, happy, odd embarrassment in which lovers usually nimble-minded become awkward.

Then the shop-door opened and Miss Amelia hurried in, saying breathlessly—

"Miss Westcott here? I saw her in the window a moment ago . . . expecting me . . . grieved to be so late.' And she perched on a chair by the little table. "And so, Pauline, you have started without me? Quite right."

Pauline and Unwin looked at Miss Amelia with natural astonishment.

"Do have a cake," said Pauline nervously.

"Thank you," said Miss Amelia, drawing Unwin's cup towards her and taking a bun. "Ah! quite a feast. Lovers' Kisses. Delicious, of course . . ." She broke off and flushed all over her delicate face. "Not that I mean . . ." She stopped again. "Let us all be eating."

Pauline pitied the little lady's obvious disturbance, though unable to imagine the cause, while Unwin nibbled another bun, flying in the face of organs which absolutely declined further sustenance, and remarked jauntily—

"I persuaded Miss Westcott to join me. I hate having tea alone."

"The more the merrier," seconded Pauline, making an effort to appear unconcerned. "So glad you came, Miss Amelia."

"No—no. I can't suppose . . ." She gazed distractedly around the shop. "Oh, here they are!"

And as she spoke, the Vicar, the Vicar's wife, Mrs. Delamere and Miss Harriet entered.

"You are expecting them too?" said Unwin, rising.

"Sit down. Sit down. Let us all be eating," urged Miss Amelia. Then she raised her voice and said in a high, fluty tone, across the shop. "H-hem! I am having a little party, Harriet, as you see."

"You . . . a party! And never told me!" said Miss Harriet, staring.

"Impromptu," fluttered Miss Amelia. "I always think impromptu things. . . . Do come and join us, Mrs. Delamere."

The Vicar, the Vicar's wife, Miss Harriet and Mrs. Delamere, all four stood and gaped across buns and cheesecakes at Miss Amelia's flushed face, and at the excited lilt of her tongue.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Delamere at last, "but I am not in the habit of taking my tea at six-thirty."

"Oh, nice change . . . too much of a groove in Wendlebury," responded Miss Amelia.

"We are here," announced the Vicar, taking the affair in hand, "to make arrangements for the Parish Treat."

"Amelia knew that. I parted from her in this street only five minutes since," said Miss Harriet, puzzled and annoyed.

Then the proprietress of the shop came forth, ushering the distinguished party into that little room behind the shop where so many wedding and christening feasts had been arranged during the past fifty years that there min-

gled with the smell of bride-cake a fragrance of youth and innocent pleasure.

The three left behind looked at each other.

"Perhaps Mr. Unwin would kindly obtain the bill," said Miss Amelia, rather faintly.

"If you are sure you won't have any more?" said Unwin, wondering what on earth it all meant.

"No, thank you," said Pauline. And as he moved away she leaned close to Miss Amelia, pressing her hand. "You are a dear. But it's not a crime to have tea with a young man in a shop, even in Wendlebury; is it?"

"Not a crime, but an indiscretion; which is worse, sometimes, in affairs of the . . ." Miss Amelia broke off and continued after a pause, earnestly and simply, forgetting herself and her nervousness: "My dear, *talk* made me an old maid. It puts off more love-affairs than any cause in the world. In my youth a young gentleman cared for me up to a certain point and then it all died out and I very much wondered why. I spent, really, a good many years wondering. But in the end, I knew—just from seeing the same thing happen to other young people. When all is there, ready, but not—fixed, if you know what I mean?—gossip is like pulling up a plant to see how it grows. The plant often dies." She sighed, and the tears came into her eyes though she was smiling. "That is why I joined you. I didn't want . . . I should be so sorry——"

"Dear Miss Amelia," said Pauline softly. She could not find anything else to say, in spite of the tender, kind thoughts which filled her heart for the little lady: but she felt all the same that there could be no comparison between the love of a mid-Victorian gentleman in side-whiskers and that of Unwin. She knew deeply that no lover in the world was like hers, nor ever could be. It seemed ridiculous to think of anything so strong and splendid being killed by the idle tongues of Wendlebury.

And as they all three presently went out of the shop together, she wore such a radiant air that the kind shop-

woman felt a stirring of the pulses and a desire to throw crystallised rose-leaves, while Unwin was so plainly in love with all the world because of her, that Miss Amelia walked home between them as if on a rosy cloud, upborne by their happiness.

On the way from Miss Amelia's, Pauline and Unwin talked of her, and said how dear she was, and they both secretly saw her coming and going in their house, in the lovely future when they had one another.

"You'll come to Ryeford Church with me to-morrow?" said Unwin, holding Pauline's hand close when they reached Aunt Dickson's door.

"Yes," said Pauline.

Then she ran up the path, longing to be alone with her wonderful thoughts, and opened the front door softly. But as she went past the living-room door its blank panels seemed to condemn her. Poor Aunt Dickson, shut out for ever from all this glory and tingling adventure of love. . . . She paused a moment, fighting with her desire for solitude, and then went in.

"Bless me!" said Aunt Dickson, "you have got a colour. Nobody would know you for the pale little girl that came to Wendlebury. Where have you been?"

"I have had tea with Miss Amelia and Mr. Unwin."

"Unwin again!"

"Yes. Aunt Dickson—I don't believe he does drink. He may have done once, by some accident, but I shall never, never believe he is a drunkard."

"No? Well, you are not a child, Pauline. You are not even my own daughter, though I care for you as one. I can do no more."

She spoke heavily, but after a while Pauline's gaiety infected her, and she began to look out bravely as usual across a jolly world which remained jolly in spite of everything.

Then a man selling the first crabs of the season went by, and she called to him through the open window. He

seemed to her, in his blue jacket, like another pleasant harbinger of summer. And he went off primed with messages for the Missus and thanking Aunt Dickson kindly.

"You might be a millionaire, the way you throw money about!" smiled Pauline, her own joy deepened, now she had conquered that desire to be alone, by the sunshine of goodness and friendliness in this little room.

"I feel like one," said Aunt Dickson gaily.

And indeed she made of it a jolly and open-hearted thing, this living on half her income and spending the rest on extras. But Mrs. Delamere with the same means was a poor woman, grudging and considering every penny not spent on her own actual needs.

Later in the evening, the carrier came from the country with butter and cream cheeses, and Eva could be heard outside, scolding him as usual for being late while listening with pleasure to the scraps of gossip which he had to tell. Then Aunt Dickson sent out word that he was to be given a cup of cocoa, and so the night came, pleasantly, as it did almost always to this little house, through which flowed a constant stream of simple kindness which kept the air so sweet.

About ten Aunt Dickson went to bed, and Pauline remained to put the sitting-room in order. Eva, carrying away the supper tray, paused conversationally.

"Mrs. Delamere's maids is leaving again. They say she can't get no others to come. I don't wonder."

Pauline laughed.

"They are always saying something in Wendlebury. It is a regular gossip-shop."

Eva rested her tray on the table again.

"You say right there. But it's nothing to the place I come from." She paused, and added in a low tone: "Carrier's just been telling me. A poor girl I know got into trouble and she's hung herself in the cowstable. They called it tempery insanity, but it was talk drove her to it.

When she see two women together, and she passed, she knew they was talking about her. If she'd been a real bad 'un she wouldn't ha' cared; as my poor mother used to say, it isn't the real bad 'uns that talk kills—it' the bad 'uns that would like to be good." She paused, taking up her tray. "But I can't help liking a bit o' news, myself. Us Martins always was ones for a bit o' news."

"Well," said Pauline, "I suppose if you like people, you like talking about people. And then you're a gossip before you know where you are."

"Anyway," replied Eva, "*I* hate to hear them folks talk that's always turning over what they say for fear it should get them into trouble somewheres or somehow. If a man goes down a road at night with a neighbour's best hen under his coat and you may only pass remark that mebbe he's borrowed it until morning. . . . Well, give me gossip, say I! What's newspapers, mostly—all the inte'resting parts about murders and divorces and that? Why, gossip, of course. And then they say London folks doesn't like gossip same as we do. We're all of a piece in the world—that's what we are."

"But the poor girl . . ." said Pauline.

"Ay! it falls hard on some," concluded Eva, going out. "It does certainly fall hard on some!"

Then Pauline turned out the lights and went up to her own room, where she could be alone at last with that most wonderful discovery in the world, which is found anew every time as if it were hidden since the creation.

Both Unwin and Pauline that night felt upliftedly aware that no one had ever been down the exact path they travelled, during those happy, wakeful hours chimed out by the Wendlebury bells above the little town. And perhaps they were right: love is so vast.

The following afternoon Pauline went out to take her walk as usual while Aunt Dickson rested. Unwin was waiting for her beyond the long row of straight-fronted

houses, and they made their way by a devious, back route to the country, not because they really feared to be seen, but because secrecy is an instinct with young lovers. As they passed the Bowling Green Inn, they saw the jackdaw hopping about and said to each other "Mary Jane!" and laughed at the jolliness of a world in which true lovers could be first brought together by a wicked old bird in a chimney.

"I'd like to have the old fellow for my own," said Unwin.

"So should I," responded Pauline, and they both thought at once of a little green lawn behind a house where they would live together as man and wife. The air seemed full of wedding bells and sunshine, though it rained a little, and the only sound to be heard was the clash of pewter pots, in the hand of the maid of the inn, who stared at them from an open doorway.

They did not put up umbrellas, being clad in raincoats and caps, and the taste of the soft, gently-falling rain was fresh and pleasant on their lips. They felt a strong, springing sense of growth, like that of the fields and hedgerows of early summer which they passed when they turned into the Ryeford Road. The scarecrow waved a disreputable sleeve, seeming to crack low jokes with the crows about sweethearts, but all the same wishing these two good luck.

"Lovely day!" said Unwin, and they went on gaily, though by now the rain was slanting in great sheets across the red roofs and the grey spire.

Before reaching the Dragon at Ryeford, they encountered Chubb's cab in which Delia Lambert was seated, and some latent antagonism edged Pauline's voice as she said "Good afternoon." But Chubb pulled up without being told, considering that any acquaintance of his generous fare must wish to speak to her, for she was a lady, she was, and no doubt about it. Therefore he said, with comparative affability—

"It's wot I call wet."

"Better for driving, Miss Lambert?" said Unwin, approaching and holding out a friendly hand.

"Yes, thank you. I'm turning into a tree or vegetable. It's queer, but I like a new experience. My arms are still human arms but my head is part of a nice, comfortable cabbage; you'll soon see me sprouting."

"I've always rather envied them, standing by streams with their feet in forget-me-nots," said Pauline lightly.

"That's how you want to feel for a time, Miss Lambert," said Unwin. "Do you a power of good."

Delia glanced at him half wistfully, half curiously, and then at Pauline.

"Why?"

"You know."

She smiled her odd, twisted smile, which was yet charming because it was so unartificial.

"But our roots still ache every now and then. Don't you think so, Miss Westcott?"

"I couldn't imagine you taking root."

"No; you're right," said Delia in rather a sombre tone; but immediately she added with a smile: "Well, I must be getting on. It is a delightful day for walking, in spite of the rain, isn't it?"

"If you stopped at home for rain in Wendlebury . . ."

Thus was it politely agreed between the ladies that there could be nothing unusual in a girl and a young man taking a long country walk together in a downpour. Then Chubb jerked his rein, and Griselda went on with a blink and a gentle whisk of the tail, looking most oddly like a romantic maiden aunt.

Pauline and Unwin pursued their road with a feeling that something significant had happened, and yet nothing had happened. Only they were in some way thrown out of tune. They no longer felt themselves buoyantly part of a gay world in which even the scarecrow waved them good luck. They were two real people, in a real life,

where discords unite to make harmony at a long distance."

"You know her well, then?" said Pauline.

"Pretty well. Don't you like her?"

"Yes. At least I have no reason for not liking her . . . only . . ."

"I'm sorry for her," said Unwin, and Pauline felt rebuffed and angry, not realising the plain fact that she was jealous. If lovers realised plain facts about themselves how strange life would be . . . so utterly different. Yet we love dear life best as it is, just as we love a dear person with a crooked eyebrow or a long upper lip, and would not have them otherwise.

"She is odd," pursued Unwin, utterly unable to conceive that the lady of his dreams should be jealous of a battered woman over thirty. "You can't judge her, really, by ordinary standards."

"Interesting, I suppose?" said Pauline, controlling voice and face to a level politeness.

"Very," said Unwin. Then, as they were now approaching the Dragon Inn, he said impulsively, "Some people do seem to have hard luck and you don't know why. Temperament, I suppose; but they don't make their own temperament to begin with. It does seem hard . . ." He broke off, glancing at the Dragon Inn which they were then passing.

Pauline noted the urgency of his tone, and put it all down to his sympathy with Delia. She felt offended in her most secret girl's pride that Unwin should bring her out here with a practical understanding that he would ask her to marry him, and then should talk with such keen interest about another woman. But she held up her head and said clearly—

"I've always believed in luck. You can't explain that away."

"Organised luck is the greatest power in the world so far as material things go," assented Unwin, but he spoke

mechanically, as she did, and, behind the words, events of the spirit were taking place without either of the speakers being aware of it in the other. This happens so constantly that there would be no need to notice the fact but for the result produced in these two lives.

"The rain is ceasing," said Pauline, and as she said that her spirit slipped away from Unwin's to an infinite distance; all the flush and glow faded: she became once more the will-o'-the-wisp, elusive and remote.

But he felt a greater longing to get near her than he had ever known before. The desire for a woman to whom he could tell everything—the wife in his home—became as great as his young desire for her love. He turned to her suddenly, taking her arm.

"Pauline, one morning when I stood there," he said, "I'd just seen a man die: one of the sort that seems bound to make a mess of things. And he went so hard. He seemed to have no hope. I can't tell you how I felt at that minute. . . ."

"I was there. I saw you," said Pauline.

Her words were like stones falling into a well. She could not say any more, and he stood staring at her.

"You saw me! What did you think?"

She opened her lips to tell him she had thought he was drunk, but she could not do it.

"I thought you looked . . . dreadful. . . ."

Then, behind her sick self-reproach, she felt a little light growing. It was just as if some one had let the sun into a dark room, opening one window after another until the whole place was filled with light and you could smell the flowers and hear the birds singing. She had been ready to marry him and had believed in him in a sense, through faith; but this was certainty.

"Poor man!" she sighed, and from her heart she said a prayer for Delamere.

Then they entered Ryeford Church, and Unwin began to tell her the history of the square tower beneath which

Ryeford people had worshipped for nearly a thousand years. And this did not make Pauline's own life seem a little fleeting thing of no matter, as might have been supposed, but only glorified it, giving a young love a sense of all love being eternal.

The joy of the artist—architecture being the greatest of all the arts and the mother of them all—mingled in Unwin's case with his joy in the woman he had chosen, so that Ryeford Church, on that gleaming afternoon when sun shone after rain, was filled with an unforgettable glory such as some men never see all their lives.

Pauline, too, felt lifted up as if on wings by an intense relief which showed now how great her apprehension must have been, though she made herself overcome it. But something within her wondered a little why Unwin delayed his proposal, and this soon left her remote. She so easily withdrew, and there was no flush of girlish passion in her as she followed him through the silent aisles. If there had been, he would have broken his resolution to refrain from asking her to be his wife until he had definitely received Lord Southwater's appointment.

For it was Unwin's misfortune that he always desired to have the whole thing perfect—he wanted love and time and circumstance all together—and that exquisite satisfaction in the future enabled him to keep silence now. He was, with no outward sign of it, a seeker after loveliness, which was why he delighted in the prospect of being made guardian over these beautiful graveyards planted in kindness by people who loved. It was real hard work, enough to fill a man's life with manly toil, and yet a pursuit of loveliness.

Still, when he and Pauline parted outside her door, he began to feel a sudden misgiving. She looked so sweet with her little, pale, pointed face and deep eyes and her expressive, gloveless hand held out to him, and yet he was no longer certain of her. He held her hand, and yet she seemed once more a long way off. He wished ardently

that he had asked her when she seemed so near to him on the way to Ryeford. He would ask her now, with Aunt Dickson beaming amiably through the open window.

But Pauline's eyes mirrored back his glance blankly, mysteriously, like a pool in a deep wood.

"Good-bye, Mr. Unwin."

"I shall see you to-morrow?"

Then Aunt Dickson called from the window—

"Lovely evening after the rain, Mr. Unwin."

So he stood among the geraniums and lobelias beneath the window talking to Aunt Dickson, and the desperate thought came to him that he would demand an interview with Pauline in the back sitting-room; he could not go away without knowing if she loved him or not. But Aunt Dickson complained that the evening air grew chilly, so the window was closed: and as he looked at Pauline's face through the glass he felt suddenly shut away from her for ever. She seemed to recede always as he advanced.

But before he reached the end of the street he was glad he had not asked for the interview in the back room among stuffed pike caught by Aunt Dickson's late husband. He had not done violence to her feelings for that end. And secretly, unconsciously, he was glad to have all the wonder and glory still in front of him; for if Pauline glimmered elusive in his misty thoughts, he also was of those who love to follow.

CHAPTER XI

PAULINE SEES A PAGEANT

AUNT DICKSON sat in her usual place by the window. Opposite to her was the little dressmaker with whom Delia Lambert lodged.

"Looks as good as new," said the dressmaker, stitching a clean lace front into a bodice.

"You save more by mending than by making," said Aunt Dickson. But the remarks on both sides were mechanical—the bow of the acrobat on entering the stage—the real business about to begin.

"So that fortune-telling person is still with you?" said Aunt Dickson, figuratively chalking her feet.

"Yes; she does for herself and is a quiet lodger," apologised Miss Walker, "and nobody believes her fortune-telling, so it doesn't really matter. Live and let live, say I!"

This was a principle so after Aunt Dickson's own heart that she could only respond, swinging up, as it were, upon the trapeze. "I hear she has a lot of visitors?"

"Yes," said Miss Walker, anxious to oblige, for the occasions when she worked for Aunt Dickson were red-letter days in her calendar, and she always looked on the little house as a land flowing with hot drinks and buttered tea-cakes. "I am out, of course, as a rule, but people sometimes come in the evening after I get home." She paused and leaned forward. "Miss Amelia for one."

"Miss Amelia! You would think she would be the *last*," said Aunt Dickson, enjoying herself very much.

"And Mr. Unwin," continued Miss Walker. "He has been several times."

"Unwin!" exclaimed Aunt Dickson again, then as Pauline came into the room she added excitedly—

"What do you think? It appears that Unwin often goes to that lodger of Miss Walker's to get his fortune told."

"Not—not exactly that," interposed the little dressmaker, mindful of that supper-party when she had felt so gay and happy, and not wishing to prejudice Unwin in Pauline's eyes. "I think he just comes out of kind-heartedness, because Miss Lambert is lonely. You can't help liking her, though she does smoke and leave her things all over the place. And him putting her out when she was a-fire seems to make a sort of bond—" Miss Walker gazed anxiously at the two ladies. "It would, you know."

"But how did he find her on fire?" demanded Aunt Dickson, asking the question which leapt up at once in Pauline's mind.

"He happened to be passing—Mrs. Chubb sent him in—only common 'umanity," faltered the little dressmaker, shocked at the impression she had made. "You can't let cigarette smoking and a difference of gender stand in the way of saving life, can you?" She turned urgently to Pauline who still stood by the door. "Can you, Miss Pauline?"

Pauline smiled and came forward into the room, holding out the black cotton which she had been sent to purchase.

"No, indeed. Besides, I daresay Miss Lambert is a very amusing companion. I spoke to her yesterday when I was on the Ryeford Road."

"Oh, you never told me!" said Aunt Dickson.

"Did I not?" said Pauline lightly; but she knew quite well that for some obscure reason she had refrained from mentioning the encounter.

"Were you with Unwin?" pursued Aunt Dickson.

"Yes. She was in Chubb's cab," said Pauline. "Now, Miss Walker, I think this cotton will be all right?"

But Aunt Dickson was not to be so easily turned aside.

"I thought Miss Lambert was poor—very poor. How can she afford Chubb?"

"She came somehow into a bit of money," said Miss Walker. "It is a very good thing for Chubb." She paused, then, eager to aid Delia's cause, she added impulsively: "Chubb thinks the world of her. Says she's the nicest lady he ever served."

"Mrs. Chubb thinks differently, according to Eva's account," said Aunt Dickson.

"Well," said Miss Walker, "I shall ever remember the time when my teeth was all wrong and dropping down, and me no treat for anybody, and the way she had me to supper with Mr. Unwin and salmon and every delicacy."

"A supper party!" said Aunt Dickson. "Well, I never."

Fortunately for Miss Walker there came a ring at the front door, so she peered through the window, exclaimed: "It's Miss Amelia as I'm alive!" and escaped thankfully into the back room.

It was now early afternoon, with a pleasant spring light on the flowers and on the tea-tray already laid, which only wanted the square silver teapot. Miss Amelia sat down in the midst of all this cheerful plenty and began to chatter nervously.

"Such a delicious day. Must take advantage of it. My sister Harriet has been to lunch at the Vicarage. She is quite a lay-curate as I always say. The least they *can* do—an occasional cutlet—the wear and tear in shoe-leather alone." Then she broke off and repeated aimlessly, "Delicious day!"

"Did Miss Harriet enjoy herself?" said Pauline, merely for the sake of making a remark, it being obvious that Miss Amelia had something more serious than the lunch at the Vicarage on her mind.

"No. Yes," the little lady rose abruptly, almost up-

setting the tray of cakes. "I—the fact is—dear Mrs. Dickson, I am feeling the—the need of air."

"But the window is wide open," said Aunt Dickson, staring at Miss Amelia in some perturbation. "Do you feel ill?"

"Not at all. You mistake me. I mean *country* air, on the Ryeford Road," said Miss Amelia. "And I wondered if Pauline would accompany me."

"But it is just tea-time," said Aunt Dickson. "Surely you don't want to miss your tea?"

Miss Amelia turned pink and white, and looked miserably at Pauline.

"I have always understood that air was feeding," she murmured. "If dear Pauline *would* come now I should be so greatly obliged."

"Of course I will," said Pauline at once. "I have my hat and coat on already."

"So sweet of you. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Dickson. Please don't think it unkind . . . a sudden craving for air . . ." and she murmured herself agitatedly out of the house.

Once in the street, she became a little calmer.

"Let us talk of indifferent topics," she said, straightening her veil with trembling fingers. "If we could exchange views about the parliamentary situation until we reached the corner of the Ryeford Road I think it might do me good. That and the fresh air. I always think anything about Parliament so soothing . . . talk and talk and the same thing repeated over and over again and nothing really happening. It has the same effect on my mind now as the 'House that Jack built' had when I was little."

So they went along, Miss Amelia talking and Pauline listening, until they reached the green country.

"And now," said Miss Amelia, putting up her veil, "you will doubtless wonder why I brought you here?"

"Has Miss Harriet quarrelled with the Vicar again?" said Pauline.

Miss Amelia shook her head.

"If it were only that!" She paused. "I thought I must tell you alone. I thought you would prefer it. It would be such an unpleasant shock if people were there, for you could scarcely help changing countenance. And as you are not *really* engaged——"

"Miss Amelia," pleaded Pauline, "do tell me what you mean?"

And something in the girl's tone made Miss Amelia forget her own nervousness, so that she said with quiet directness—

"The Vicar had a letter from Lord Southwater this morning. Mr. Unwin has not got the post."

"Not got the post!" said Pauline.

"No. The Vicar went in to see Unwin. He is so very sorry about it."

"But why has Lord Southwater changed his mind? It was practically settled," said Pauline.

"Nobody knows. Lord Southwater just said he had made other arrangements."

Pauline drew a long breath.

"Well, I must go back. Aunt Dickson is expecting several people to tea and she will need me."

Miss Amelia peered up anxiously into Pauline's pale face which told her nothing.

"You don't think me officious?"

"No, no," cried Pauline, putting her hand through Miss Amelia's arm. "You are the kindest and best. Only I don't want to say anything. . . . I don't feel as if I could. But I shall never, never forget your coming to tell me."

"And money does not really matter at all in life," added dear Miss Amelia. "So long as people are young and care for each other . . ."

A thrush sang out—dear thrush—Amen! A-A-men! It was just a psalm in praise of love that the little old maid and the bird gave forth together.

Pauline returned to the little house when she found it difficult to hand cups and saucers and seem prettily interested in the misdemeanours of maidservants. At last, however, the guests went away, and the question which had been hot upon her tongue during that endless tea-party was spoken.

"Did you tell Mrs. Delamere about Mr. Unwin?"

"What about him?"

"His being in the Dragon doorway that morning." She paused, "Drunk—as I thought."

"I don't remember doing so," said Aunt Dickson. "No, I feel sure I never did."

"Did you tell anybody?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, now I come to think of it, I did mention the matter to some one, but I forget who." She looked red, and troubled, at Pauline, searching her memory. "Oh, I know . . . Cakes . . . Miss Argle! But it would be in the strictest confidence, I am sure."

"And Miss Argle no doubt told Mrs. Delamere in the strictest confidence. Well—" Pauline's throat felt dry and her voice came huskily—"Well, that story has cost Unwin his appointment. And yet he had been up all night with a dying man whom he got to know by chance."

"I remember a stranger dying at the Dragon," said Aunt Dickson. "But Lord Southwater is a just man, and he would never be influenced to that degree by a piece of trivial gossip. He is used to the world—and to Mrs. Delamere also, Pauline. Besides, we do not know that Miss Argle said anything, after all."

"Some one must find out," replied Pauline. "Then Lord Southwater must be told the exact truth."

Aunt Dickson shook her head.

"That would only make bad, worse. If Lord Southwater knows nothing about the story and has never heard that Unwin is reputed to be rather irresponsible, one might do a great deal of harm. For all you know, the post may

be offered to him sometime in the future. We can't possibly know Lord Southwater's reasons."

Aunt Dickson spoke urgently, fully believing what she said; but the motives of all people are mixed, and she was unaware how greatly her vague prejudice against Unwin as a husband influenced her conclusions. In addition to this, she was old and dependent on others, and something below reason—the instinct of self-preservation which is so strong in the very young and the very old—made her unconsciously work to keep by her side one who so reinforced her waning vitality.

"But you surely don't think we ought to sit still and do nothing!" said Pauline.

"We must think it over," said Aunt Dickson, flushed and disturbed. "I don't see what we can do that will not injure Unwin more than help him. You see, we don't know Lord Southwater has heard anything."

Pauline walked to the window and stood looking out at the soft rain slanting across the houses opposite with their iron rails and gleaming knockers.

"I know," she said; "I who have taken his chance in life away from him."

"No—no. That is talking in a foolish exaggerated way, not at all like you, Pauline," said Aunt Dickson. "You meant no harm."

"But harm happened," persisted Pauline. "Oh! if you could only unsay things!"

Aunt Dickson shook her head, looking into the fire, and back on her own life.

"Yes, we all feel that, one time or another; but not even God Himself can call back a word that is once said."

A silence fell, which lasted until the light began to grow dim. Aunt Dickson was wandering down who knows what forgotten paths in which there was no memory of Pauline, while Pauline herself stared out of the window at the darkening street, feeling that sense of dull unhap-

piness which ushers in agony of mind, as does an uneasy torpor some physical illness.

She watched the lamplighter come forth with his little ladder and kindle sparks of light among the shadows; it all seemed meaningless and yet charged with fate, as trifles do at such a time.

Then Aunt Dickson awoke from the half doze into which she had fallen and said cheerfully—

"Come, Pauline, it's no use crying over spilt milk. If you are going always to think twenty times before you speak once, you may as well be dumb for all the fun you'll make in the world."

"Fun!" said Pauline, unconsciously echoing Mrs. Chubb. "What's fun? You can be an ass and a prophet at the same time if you are only solemn enough."

"Fun is the sunshine of life," said Aunt Dickson. "It makes just the same difference to a grey life as sunshine does to a grey street."

"It has led me into saying many things to amuse you that I ought never to have said," retorted Pauline. "I have grown to be a gossip. I will never tell you anything again."

But before the words were out of her mouth she repented them, and the hurt look on Aunt Dickson's big, kindly face, caused her to add hastily, "Oh! I didn't mean that. I simply love coming in and telling you what I have seen. Every time I come up the steps I think this is home, and here is somebody waiting for me."

"But you blame me all the same, Pauline?"

"I don't. There is no one to blame but myself."

"I shall not sleep a wink to-night, troubling about it," said Aunt Dickson.

"Nonsense!" replied Pauline, trying now to cover up the truth. "As you say, we don't know that our story has anything at all to do with Unwin's loss of the appointment."

Thus the tables were turned, and Pauline now became

the one to soothe and reassure, because a bad night meant a great deal in Aunt Dickson's state of health and must be avoided at all costs. Finally, the tortoise-tail was touched, and Aunt Dickson resumed cheerful command of the daily round again. Eva entered to clear away the tea-things which still stood about in the twilit room, and when Pauline followed her into the kitchen with the cake-stand she remarked casually—

"Sorry I was late back from the butcher's, but I got talking to Mrs. Chubb. She says Mr. Unwin hasn't gotten that job he was after. She worked at Vicarage today and heard the news there."

"So I understand," said Pauline, beginning to put the little yellow cakes away in round black japanned tins.

"They seem to say he has something else to go to," continued Eva. "But anyway, he would never hang round waiting for help from other people. He's the independent sort that wouldn't get much if he did. They say the Lord helps them that help themselves, and it's a jolly good thing He does, for the neighbours won't. They'll give all they've got to give to somebody as sits in a lump and cries."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Pauline.

"Don't you? Well, look about you a bit then, Miss! And Mr. Unwin's like us Martins in that, I bet a button. He'd rather be picked at than pitied." She paused. "But he's got another post. Mrs. Chubb heard them say so. Somewhere in Africa. It'll be a change from Wendlebury."

Eva lifted the kettle off the fire, so there was silence for a moment, with the red firelight shining on the kitchen fender and on the japanned box, and the rich fragrance of cakes made from country butter and fresh eggs. "He's got the job because the last man died; seems it's an unhealthy part . . . the one afore that died too, so they said. Mr. Unwin wants a good heart to go, doesn't he? But men doesn't think much about things like that."

"Did they . . ." Pauline broke off and then went on again, "did they say anything more about it?"

"No, but I dessay Mr. Unwin is a bit too flighty-like for Lord Southwater," suggested Eva. "There's allus tongues wagging; nothing you can lay hold on, you know, but that's no help. I'd a deal rather have somebody say I'd a wooden leg straight out than go hinting there was something funny about me figure. I could give 'em a kick and show 'em that I was all right. But you can't fight *nothing;* it's like fighting against a fog."

"But surely the Vicar does not believe any harm of Mr. Unwin?"

"No. He took Chubb and drove over this morning to see Lord Southwater directly he heard, but it wasn't no good." Eva looked kindly at Pauline. "Never mind, Miss, you like hot weather. Or if not, there's as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it. Young men's all right, but as my poor mother used to say when mine all seemed to come to nothing somehow, 'Eva,' she says, 'some can keep 'em and some can't; and if you can't you'd best let 'em go graceful.'" She paused, searching in her good heart for comfort. "I'm on'y tell you what I tell myself. Providence meant us all to walk out, because He gave us them kind of feelings, but He didn't mean us all to get married, else He'd ha' provided enough men to go round."

She looked anxiously into Pauline's white face and was relieved to see a smile.

"Well, Eva, perhaps we shall be two gay old maids together; who knows?"

"There isn't any old maids now," said Eva. "We've given up letting the men think we should be thankful for the worst of 'em, and we'll soon let 'em know we'll go without altogether unless we can have the best of 'em." She settled her cap and gazed out defiantly at Pauline, her own long, pale features all alight. "I'm a bachelor girl; I am. I aren't going to let the thought of not getting married down *me.*"

"It's not . . ." began Pauline, then she saw the impossibility of saying anything about the matter to Eva. "Well, I hope Mr. Unwin may like Africa."

"Don't you worry," said Eva. "Change—that's what men like. And it isn't any use breaking your heart because nature didn't make 'em different. There's Mr. Unwin now, as pleasant a gentleman as ever stepped, but he'll walk out with you of an afternoon and go and see Miss Lambert of an evening. And who blames him? I don't. No more than I blames a bull for bellering. You want to blame nature."

This philosophy, however, was lost sight of by Pauline in the shock of finding out that her most secret and sacred feelings were known as publicly as the advertisements for chicken-houses and hay in the *Wendlebury Herald*. It seemed to her odious, shameful; she longed, as she sat playing draughts with Aunt Dickson, to turn her back on Wendlebury for ever. Only her warm, living sense of gratitude, a rare quality belonging only to souls that are fundamentally generous, enabled her to contemplate a series of evenings such as this one.

But when she was once alone in her own room, all other thoughts were swamped by the fear that she had injured the man she loved. Her delicate elusiveness had kept her free from those thrills and half joys which some girls know as soon as they are past childhood, and now true love came to her with all the strength and freshness of the first time. It was like a blind man who should first see the sun rise across the Egyptian desert near the temple of Hathor . . . the whole wonder and glory of dawn revealed at once.

And now, piercing through that love, came the sharp suspicion that she had been the one to take from Unwin his chance in life; and few men have more than one. She tossed about in a fever of remorse and powerlessness. If she could only take back what she had said! She must

take it back. There must be some way. God did not so punish men for a chance word.

Then common-sense told her that God had nothing to do with it. He works in a majestic order—seed and fruit—cause and effect. He leaves us free.

She ceased weakly to blame God and blamed herself, and those who do that have reached a stepping-stone. They are no longer immersed in the Slough of Despond, however they may agonise.

And it was indeed agony that Pauline lived through that night. Her fevered imagination threw terrible pictures on the darkness, giant distorted shadows like those cast by a candle on a blank wall. She saw the poor servant-girl of whom Eva had once spoken, floating face upwards on the green surface of the pond. She saw the tragic company of great men who have been hounded out of life by bitter tongues. The tales she had read of them were imbued with a strange reality in passing through her mind; her thoughts were fused by some action of the nerves into pictures. It was a most dreadful pageant of gossip that she witnessed, lying on her bed in that quiet room. And over and over again, pushed vehemently away but returning always like a refrain made visible, came the picture of Unwin stretched gaunt under a burning sky with a great bird flying towards him.

She knew well enough that if he did also die of fever, like the previous man holding the post, it would probably be in a tent or in his own bungalow. This vision was only something half remembered from a picture-book seen in childhood and now brought to the surface of her mind. But the horror was none the less real. She saw the great bird hovering and felt that it was she who had sent Unwin out to die.

But with the first streak of dawn these nightmare visions cleared away. For Pauline belonged to the modern type of woman who no longer resigns herself to endure until she has tried with all her powers to make things

better. And though she was overstrung and off the normal after the experience of the night, this only so far affected her as to make a plan seem natural and feasible which would, in the ordinary way, have seemed to her useless if not ridiculous.

So it was in a hopeful mood that she breakfasted, sent Eva to order Chubb's cab and entered Aunt Dickson's bedroom, saying with a sort of high-strung casualness—

"It is a lovely morning. I will take those baby-clothes to Mrs. Dunn to-day."

"You'll have to have Chubb," said Aunt Dickson. "Poor Agnes, she would have been better off as my servant still than living at the world's end on a pound a week with five children and a husband fond of beer. But she would have him." Aunt Dickson sighed and looked wistfully at Pauline. "If girls only knew when they were well off!"

"Then the world would come to an end, Aunt Dickson."

"Well," said Aunt Dickson, "you ask Agnes to-day, Pauline; she'll tell you whether it is not all a case of carrot and donkey."

"With romance for the carrot?" said Pauline lightly.

"With romance for the carrot," repeated Aunt Dickson heavily.

CHAPTER XII

PAULINE INTERVENES

CHUBB'S cab acted as an incentive to quiet reflection, the even clop! clop! of Griselda's hoofs—which looked as if they should have worn elastic-sided boots—gradually soothed Pauline's mind, and by the time she reached the cottage where Aunt Dickson's gifts were to be deposited, she was already wondering at the fears and imaginings of the past night.

The woman came out with a child in her arms and two others, sunburnt and golden-haired, clinging to her skirts. Roses climbed about the doorway, and within could be seen a kitchen with a red brick floor. But it was not so much these outward things which made Pauline see that Aunt Dickson's old servant had been wise to leave comfortable servitude for poverty and child-bearing and hard work; it was the woman's grateful: "Mrs. Dickson's the best mistress a girl ever had; so she is; but you like to have a home of your own."

As Pauline went back to her cab, the words followed her—a home of your own. She saw now that it was the very spirit of home, brooding over that little cottage, which made it so lovely. The same spirit has made beautiful thousands and thousands of houses, great and small, all up and down England. No one can see the process, but the result shines out between green branches and behind little flower gardens everywhere. . . . We must be very careful that we do not scare away the Spirit of Home as we have the fairies.

Pauline paused a moment, looking back, her pale, nar-

row, delicate face alight, her deep eyes shining. She was one of the lucky ones who are attuned to such beauty and respond to it as some others respond to a strain of music; and her own rather homeless life had deepened her appreciation of this particular scene.

"Looks as if it 'ud be damp i' winter," remarked Chubb. And Pauline started, coming down upon realities with a sort of bump.

"I want to go on to Lord Southwater's. It is only three miles further," she said.

Chubb mounted his box without speaking, then remarked over his shoulder—

"It'll be no go."

"What do you mean?" said Pauline, naturally surprised.

"I mean Mrs. Delamere's there. You don't get no subscriptions out of Lord Southwater when she is. Makes him in a bad mood. I brought Vicar back yesterday with a flea in his ear." He paused. "You'd best go home."

"I prefer to go on, now I am so far," said Pauline.

"Very well," answered Chubb. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

So the cab rumbled on again between the flowery hedgerows, but Pauline no longer felt soothed by the monotonous sounds and her mind began to work with feverish energy rehearsing beforehand what she would say to Lord Southwater. At last the tall iron gates came into sight, and Chubb spoke once more over his shoulder—

"Here I stops!"

"But I want to go to the house," objected Pauline.

"Very like. So did Vicar. But they made fun o' my cab and my mare, them shawfers did, and I ain't going to stan' it again," pronounced Chubb.

"There may not be any chauffeurs," said Pauline.

"There is. I seed two cars turn in. I won't have my cab and my mare made game on by shawfers; jumped up chaps that's allus on their dignity because they haven't

gotten any sattled place in the world yet." He paused, growing purple and blowing out his cheeks. "They didn't only make game o' my cab; they made game o' *me!*"

Griselda gave a comprehensive quiver which shook her harness, and it was as though she said, in words: "How could they be guilty of such sacrilege?" Chubb only flickered her with the rein and said gruffly: "Whoa, mare!" But he was touched to reiterate: "I won't go up to the house for nobody living."

Pauline was therefore obliged to alight and make her way on foot through the imposing portals and along the broad, perfectly-kept drive which went direct and straight, like Lord Southwater's earthly path, between prosperous smooth lawns and discreetly blooming flower beds. As she neared the house, repeating to herself with nervous desperation the speech already prepared, she caught sight of Mrs. Delamere also hurrying towards the house, but careful not to look in her direction.

Instantly the truth flashed into Pauline's mind. Mrs. Delamere had seen her arrival from some part of the park or garden, had guessed that she was going to speak to Lord Southwater about Unwin and was anxious to prevent it.

There was no reason why Pauline should know this, but she belonged to that numerous company of women who do know things without being told, and she began to hurry faster. Upon this Mrs. Delamere, still pretending not to see Pauline, also increased her speed. It became a neck-and-neck race between two ladies each anxious to preserve a dignified deportment on account of the chauffeur who waited by the steps and the butler dimly visible in the gloom of the portico. Mrs. Delamere was long of limb and uncommonly active, the crimson of middle age invaded her nose, but at a walking match she was no mean opponent, and had the advantage of knowing her ground. A swift cross-cut behind laurels brought her out well ahead —never was speed and majesty so combined in any fe-

male over forty. Pauline gave up the contest and broke into a run. She felt Mrs. Delamere hard on her track as she panted out breathlessly to the butler—

"Lord Southwater! Urgent business!"

"His lordship is expecting guests to luncheon," said the butler; impressed by Pauline's hunted appearance and desperate sincerity, as well he might be.

Pauline glanced round. Mrs. Delamere was rounding the last geranium bed.

"Oh!" cried Pauline, clasping those expressive hands, "please show me in at once. It is a church matter. His lordship will be willing to see me, I know."

The butler also glanced at the advancing figure on the drive and some faint understanding of the situation came to him. He knew, at least, that Mrs. Delamere did not wish Pauline to see his master, and he hated Mrs. Delamere, in spite of her ingratiating politeness, because she had once accused him behind his back of stealing the port. It gave him a thrill of pleasurable emotion to say suavely: "Walk this way, Madam," and usher Pauline into Lord Southwater's study just in the nick of time.

"I know that lady," panted Mrs. Delamere in the hall. "She is my guest. Fetch her out. There has been a mistake."

"Very sorry, Madam," said the butler smoothly. "His lordship will no doubt bring the lady to you directly."

"Then I will fetch her out myself!" said Mrs. Delamere.

But she knew, and the butler also knew, that to enter Lord Southwater's study uninvited was a deed beyond Mrs. Delamere's temerity. She had tried it once or twice in earlier days and had learned her lesson.

"Yes, Madam," said the butler, retiring to repeat the story elsewhere.

Mrs. Delamere stood for a moment or two frowning at the great mahogany door-panels, then she moved nearer, bent down and applied her ear to the keyhole.

Lord Southwater came forward as Pauline entered, his hand pontifically trifling with his watch-chain. He received her as if she had been a deputation because that was his manner and he would have greeted the genii bursting from Aladdin's lamp in just the same way. But he was aware, as he would have been then, of the unseemly explosiveness of the entry into his presence.

"Miss Westcott! Pray sit down," and he waited for a justification.

Pauline was glad to sit down because her knees were shaking under her and the carefully rehearsed speech had departed into limbo, but the urgent possibility of Mrs. Delamere just behind caused her to blurt out at once—

"I hear you are not giving Mr. Unwin the post. I want to tell you that I set the story going about him. It was all a mistake."

Lord Southwater glanced at the bell but thought better of it.

"I cannot discuss this matter. May I ask if you have come from Mr. Unwin?" he asked.

"No. Oh, no!" cried Pauline. "You must never, never think that. He would be simply furious with me if he knew!"

"Then——" Lord Southwater's glance now rested on Pauline's vivid face. "You are doubtless engaged to be married to him?"

"No. Yes. That is, not exactly engaged," faltered Pauline, suddenly realising that she had as yet no right to defend her lover.

But she looked so charming in her embarrassment and distress that Lord Southwater—being a man after all, though so panoplied with virtue—felt softened towards her.

"Then what is it you want of me?" he asked, and the difference in his tone reaching Mrs. Delamere even

through the keyhole, though the words did not, she murmured "Artful hussy!"

"I want to know why you did not appoint Mr. Unwin to be your architect as you meant to do?" said Pauline.

Lord Southwater looked away, gathering sternness from the bust upon the mantelpiece.

"I cannot enter into any explanation," he answered stiffly. "I have made other arrangements."

"But you promised——" urged Pauline.

Lord Southwater drew himself up.

"I made no promises. I have never yet knowingly broken my word."

"You made him believe he was sure to have the post. It *was* a promise, in spirit if not in the letter," said Pauline, clasping her hands and gazing at him with desperate entreaty. "You do see that, don't you? A promise is a promise if you mean it so and the other person knows you do. You wouldn't wriggle out of it for a little thing."

"I did not—er—wriggle out of it for a little thing," responded Lord Southwater, returning her glance with dignified annoyance. But that elusive quality in Pauline which escaped so many chimed in with that something deep hidden in Lord Southwater which made him love to keep and beautify old churches: an austere sensuousness, if it might be so called, which caused his glance now to soften once more as he looked at the girl sitting on the edge of the great carved settle. "I am sorry to state that I acted as I did with an adequate reason. I can say no more."

He had remained standing, and now moved towards the door in token that the matter was ended, but Pauline sat still.

"Stop!" she said, a hand unconsciously pressed on her thudding heart. "I know why you did it. You—you heard a tale about Mr. Unwin being seen drunk in

his dress clothes in the morning, at the doorway of the Ryeford Inn."

Lord Southwater looked at her sharply, then dropped his eyelids and fingered his watch-chain. "I do not listen to gossip."

"No, but when Mrs. Delamere told you, you were bound to believe," said Pauline quickly.

"I never said that Mrs. Delamere——" began Lord Southwater.

"No, but it was," said Pauline.

"You can know nothing about it," said Lord Southwater, his long, pink face deepening a little in colour.

Pauline rose and stood very straight before him with the morning light on her face.

"I do know," she said breathlessly; "I do know. Because I was the one who saw him."

"Then why . . .?" said Lord Southwater, turning another shade deeper: still he was charmed in spite of himself by that delicate vivid face, in shape a long oval like those of the saints in the old churches, against the dark panelling of the wall. "You should not need to ask in that case."

"Oh, that is just why!" cried Pauline. "I—I made a most terrible mistake, Lord Southwater. Mr. Unwin was not drunk, he was ill. He had been sitting up for several nights with a man—a stranger at the inn called Johnson—and he was worn out. He had just come away from the death-bed when I saw him." She paused. "Oh! I wish my tongue had been cut out! But I told my aunt just for something to say. And I have ruined Mr. Unwin's life. He will never have such a chance again. There are no more such chances to be had. And to think it was I . . ."

"My dear young lady," interrupted Lord Southwater, returning to the writing-table. "You must not blame yourself in this way. I certainly did hear the story to which you allude, but one story, *whatever* the source,"

he spoke with meaning, "would not suffice to make me discard a man whom I considered in every way suitable, especially after what had passed. No, I am not acting on that at all. Only I made the fullest inquiries and I regret to tell you—in the deepest confidence—that the result was not satisfactory. I heard from many sources that Mr. Unwin was not such a man as I should select for this particular post."

"But what made you begin to inquire?" said Pauline.

"Well, in the first instance, perhaps it was the incident to which you allude," admitted Lord Southwater. "Still, I should have taken no notice of it if further investigation had not proved . . ."

"Oh!" cried Pauline, "that's the worst of it. Nothing can be proved either one way or the other. It is as Eva said: gossip is like a fog . . . closing down . . . shutting out the truth. And yet you can't forget it. I *know* he is steady and honourable. I *know* he does not drink. I'll tell everybody what has happened. I don't care a farthing what people think of me."

"Come, be reasonable," said Lord Southwater, and though the words were cool, his tone again gave pain to Mrs. Delamere at the keyhole. "If you blazon all this abroad you will do Mr. Unwin a great injury. He will be branded as a drunkard and a wastrel in the eyes of all who know him, for such defence always defeats its own object. Let me earnestly beg of you, if you have a regard for this young man, to keep absolutely silent about the matter. That is the one service you can do him."

"So I am to keep quiet and bear this all my life?" said Pauline. "No, Lord Southwater, I can't do it. It would kill me!"

She stared at him with blazing, dark eyes in a face as white as death, and Lord Southwater felt uncomfortable. The presence of great emotions was to him like seeing some one insufficiently clad, and yet he was moved to awkward compassion.

"If you wish to serve Mr. Unwin," he repeated, "you will say nothing. You can only do him harm. And I hear he has already obtained another appointment," he added.

"Yes." Pauline moistened her dry lips. "There is often a vacancy in that place. The last man died when he had been out six months."

"That may happen anywhere," said Lord Southwater, and now he went again with determination towards the door. "I am very sorry, but I can do nothing." He opened the door.

There was a suppressed feminine "Oh!" a rustle, and Lord Southwater's stern: "Marian, what brings you here?"

"The Bracegirdles . . . just arrived . . . knew you would not wish to keep them waiting," murmured Mrs. Delamere, nonplussed for once.

"Where is the butler?" demanded Lord Southwater.

"I came . . . I thought . . ." faltered Mrs. Delamere: then she caught sight of Pauline's tear-bright eyes and emotional look generally, and became herself again. "I had an instinct that I was needed," she added with dignity. "I am the only woman you have to help you in the world, and my woman's instinct told me to come to you." She paused again. "*I* will speak to Miss Westcott for you."

"Thank you," said Pauline, her voice very distinct and steady, "but Lord Southwater has been most kind. He has already given me the information I came to seek."

Mrs. Delamere glanced from her brother-in-law to Pauline, devoured with curiosity. What could have happened in the room to make the girl look like that? And Lord Southwater's kind voice, rising and falling . . . what did it all mean? She smiled, flashing all her teeth upon the pair of them, and put a hard, jewelled hand on Pauline's arm.

"Come . . . a little refreshment . . ."

"No, thank you," said Pauline. "I have Chubb waiting outside the gate." But her glance of unconscious entreaty stirred some latent chivalry in Lord Southwater's nature, and he hastened to say in a tone which none in that house dared dispute—

"Marian, kindly entertain the Bracegirdles until I can come to them." Then he turned to Pauline: "I will see you to your carriage."

So the ladies shook hands and Pauline stepped forth with her cavalier, feeling as if she were taking part in some high municipal function and that some one, somewhere, must be going to make a long, tedious speech beginning and ending with a cough. The cough came, and so aptly with her incoherent thoughts as to be almost startling.

"Ahem! The geraniums are doing well this year."

"So it is no use?" said Pauline. "That is your last word!"

Lord Southwater frowned, feeling this to be wanting in good taste.

"I cannot discuss the subject further."

"I shall tell Mr. Unwin I have been," said Pauline.

"Then you will subject him to a great humiliation, in addition to his natural disappointment, and that will wound him more than what has gone before. A man never forgets a hurt to his pride." Lord Southwater paused. "I liked Mr. Unwin, otherwise you may be sure I should not trouble . . . I am not given to argument."

"No," said Pauline, convinced at last. "I know that the gods don't argue. Oh! I did not mean to be rude. But if ever in your life you come to have injured some one and can never make things right, you will perhaps understand."

"I trust I should never injure any one unjustly," said Lord Southwater, and it was perhaps not his fault that he felt himself the living embodiment of justice.

"I'm not blaming you," said Pauline sadly. "I am

blaming myself. I meant no harm. The Wendlebury people meant no harm either. I don't suppose one person in ten thousand would actually want to do any real hurt to another. But the best of us don't mind saying things every day that bring sorrow and shame and even death to our neighbours. We don't mean it, but things happen so."

Pauline forgot Lord Southwater as she spoke, with all his hedged-in susceptibilities; she was simply obliged to release her pressing thoughts to anything that had ears. But that estimable peer was again conscious of an awkwardness in seeing the human soul insufficiently clad . . . he liked bombazine and whalebone . . . and he was so glad to see Chubb's rotund figure between the tall, iron gateway that he called out affably—

"Morning, Chubb," and walked forward, speaking with condescension of the weather. Then he said farewell to Pauline, closed the cab-door with his large well-kept hands, and saying to Chubb: "You have had a long wait, but your horse seems a patient creature," he returned up his own wide drive between the smooth lawns and neat flower-beds, feeling that he had behaved exceedingly well.

Chubb shook the reins. "Gee-up!" then spoke to Pauline sitting behind. "My horse a patient creature . . . and his father owned Bendigo!"

Pauline nodded vaguely, leaning back in the corner of the old cab. She felt mentally and physically spent after her sleepless night and the mental exertion of this morning, but her nerves were in that excited state which rushes half a dozen trains of thought at once through the mind, where they clash together at intervals in an aching confusion.

A light shower fell, and through it Wendlebury looked very peaceful and lovely, set in the midst of the green country. And yet Pauline saw it as a place of strife, where every one was stabbing his neighbour secretly, with

the evil-enchanted dagger which may not hurt at the time but festers afterwards.

This view was so dreadful to her that she accepted Chubb's halfpenny paper with thankfulness and tried to fix her mind on it, but there, too, she seemed to see men running gleefully to stab their fellow-men, or rejoicing when they espied some one else doing it . . . the world and Wendlebury all the same . . . one stupendous gossip shop. . . .

As they neared the town, Chubb suddenly grunted, staring at Griselda's ears: "You didn't get it, then?"

"Get what?" said Pauline starting.

"The subscription—or what it was you went for."

"No," said Pauline.

"Ah!" said Chubb. "I was right. I generally am. You should ha' taken my advice and waited until Mrs. Delamere had gone away. But you would use your own judgment. It's when females gets to using their own judgment that things all goes wrong. Gee-up!" And Griselda flicked her tail gently, as one who should say: "Look at me! Here you behold the perfect type evolved by being the property of a Chubb."

The cab rumbled down the familiar street between the iron railings with the little prim gardens behind them and Pauline alighted at her own house.

"Chubb," she said, nervously fumbling with her purse, "this has been rather a long round for your mare." And she placed an extra ten shillings in his hand beyond the fare to the old servant's cottage which had been paid by Aunt Dickson.

"Thank you, Miss," said Chubb woodenly, showing no emotion as a matter of principle. It is doubtful if his self-control would have failed had he been offered ten pounds.

"And . . . Chubb . . . It might be as well not to mention that we went to Lord Southwater's. One . . . one

does not care for it to be known when an errand is a failure. You quite understand that."

"Oh! ay," said Chubb, softened by the tip. "Bless your life, Miss, you aren't the only one as has asked me to keep quiet—not by a long chalk. There's more than you think for goes on in Wendlebury."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MEETING

PAULINE went into the kitchen after the mid-day meal. Eva was washing up the crockery and did not expect to be interrupted.

"Kettle's on, if Missus wants a cup of tea," she said, rather shortly.

"Eva—" Pauline hesitated. "Has Mr. Unwin called?"

"No. Missus would have told you if he had. What should he come for in a morning?"

"You're quite sure he did not inquire at the door?"

"Bless my soul!" said Eva. "D'you think I shouldn't know the difference between him and butcher's boy? I may be getting on, as the next-door girl says, but I haven't lost me eyesight yet." With that she dashed down a bowl and rattled some plates together.

Pauline turned away, making no further remark, and Eva's irritability subsided.

"Well, Miss," she said, drying her hands, "kettle boils now. Let me make you a good cup and go you and lie down a bit. You look tired."

"No, thank you," said Pauline.

"There! You've taken the hig!" said Eva. "I did speak a bit hasty but I meant nothing by it. On'y us Martins allus was ones for being left alone after our dinners. We're made like that and we can't help it. Many's the time I've seen my poor mother lock the lot on us into the wood-shed till she'd had her bit o' nap, and if we cried and fought, we did."

She was moving about quickly while she spoke and now handed Pauline a cup of tea.

"That'll buck you up a bit," she remarked. "You didn't have no dinner to speak of." She dropped her voice and drew nearer still. "Mark my words, Miss, no man's worth pining for. Eat your meals regular and you can stand up against what comes, as my poor Mother said when my second young man give me the go-by. Ay; I've a lot to thank her for. It's easy-come, easy-go with me and the fellers now, and if you take my advice, Miss Pauline, having no mother of your own, you'll do the same. Take a leaf outer their book," she concluded.

"They are not all the same," said Pauline, putting down her cup.

"Miss Pauline," said Eva solemnly, "when sweethearting was first invented, that remark of yours was invented to go with it. To tempt you on like. There's a-many such things in the world . . . deep, they are . . . you want to be on the look-out." She paused and lowered her tone still further. "I've thought about it, being so much by myself, and you mustn't take it for a rude remark, Miss Pauline, when I say that sweethearting leads to families and families keeps the world a-going. So there has to be sweethearting. But you don't want to take any particular feller too serious. I'm not saying a word against Mr. Unwin, but I lay he hasn't gone without his dinner to-day on your account. And if he doesn't come to see you, there's them he does see. Ask Mrs. Chubb!"

"You mean Miss Lambert?" said Pauline, ashamed of herself for saying it and yet unable to refrain.

"I do," said Eva. "The smoking fortune-telling hussy, her! Not that she mayn't be a blessing in disguise, for there would be no sense in you marrying Unwin now he hasn't got the job and is going to a country full of snakes and tigers. As my poor Mother often said, 'When

you're forced to *have* a riddance, you're lucky when you can see it's a *good* riddance.' "

"I'm sure," said Pauline, feebly, from the kitchen-door, "that Miss Lambert seems kind-hearted."

"That's what they call every scalywag as robs his family to treat his pals," retorted Eva. "They may write what they like on my gravestone, but if they put that I'll come back and haunt 'em."

All these warnings, however, fell on deaf ears, because a woman in love is panoplied as by shining armour against reason, entreaty or argument.

So Pauline went down the quiet street with a determination to seek her lover as he did not come to her. She thought that his pride probably made him unwilling to seem as if he had any claim on her in the changed circumstances. She was to be free to choose anew now his brilliant prospects had all vanished and he could only offer the girl he loved a long, uncertain period of waiting.

But her heart beat high as she approached this moment towards which every thought and feeling had been straining ever since she first heard the news. She had pictured it a hundred times, and had dreamed what he would say and she would answer in so real a fashion that it seemed almost as if the interview had taken place. When she saw him coming along the street an odd sense of staleness mingled with her wild, passionate anticipation.

And he saw her with a revulsion of feeling which almost caused him to go back and avoid her. Her pale face and burning eyes in that little narrow street were not more real and vivid than they had been through the long hours of his sleepless night, yet they were so strangely different . . . less near, less tenderly human . . . showing overwhelmingly that delicate elusiveness which was a feature of her soul beneath all her frankness. And just in that moment her reserve was ready to break down for the first time in her life with a completeness which expansive natures can never experience.

But her knowledge that he owed his misfortune to her gossiping tongue stiffened up those barriers again before she reached him, leaving her awkward, stilted, constrained.

"Well met!" he said lightly, avoiding, as it were, the very hem of her heart's garment in his desire to leave her free.

"I hoped to see you," she said awkwardly. "I'm so sorry about Lord Southwater!"

His quick, hurt pride winced at the touch, and yet a moment before he had longed for her pity and sympathy with the simplicity of a hurt child wanting its mother. It happens so when two people love each other and one is keeping back a secret which preoccupies the mind. All the spoken words are enough, but the much more important unspoken conversation becomes meaningless and jangled. For in love, as in all affairs of the emotion, it is the unspoken talk that matters.

Thus these two each felt that their inner words went unanswered, and Unwin replied with that vague feeling of flatness and disappointment which we all know in similar circumstances.

"Oh! I don't mind so much as all that, you know. I have always wanted to travel and it will be a chance to see something of the world."

"But the climate——" said Pauline.

"Not so bad as it is painted," said Unwin, all his constitutional hatred of being pitied surging up within him. He would be pitied by no one now, not even Pauline. "I think I shall like it on the whole."

"Then you won't mind leaving Wendlebury?" said Pauline, but her own aroused pride caused her to add hastily: "Of course not. It is no place for an active young man."

"Well, I shall not be a cumberer of the ground much longer," said Unwin.

"I didn't mean that, of course, only there is very little scope," said Pauline nervously. "Only elderly ladies

and doctors and parsons. You'll be glad to get away from walking up and down the market-place and playing bowls at the inn."

So that was what his daily life had looked like to her! His irritated nerves and sick heart made him say with a smile—

"Yes, it will be delightful to get away into the open."

"Be sure you take plenty of quinine with you," said Pauline, also smiling. She would answer him in his own tone though she died of it afterwards. "Well, I shall be seeing you again heaps of times before you go, of course," she added, moving on.

"I hope so, indeed," he answered, raising his hat.

And so they parted gaily enough in the lightly falling rain. Some leaves in a garden near blew back, and the undersides showed white against the wind. Pauline was to remember just how they looked so long as she remembered anything, though at that moment she was not conscious of seeing them.

And Unwin walked on, head erect and hat cocked a little, as if the world went extra well with him. She did not want him. Good! She should have every facility for getting rid of him as easily as possible. And nobody in Wendlebury, or out of it, should pity him on any count.

As he passed the Pritchards' house, Miss Amelia looked out, and her tender heart rejoiced to see him so debonair.

"See, Harriet!" she cried. "I believe he does not mind losing the situation with Lord Southwater after all."

Miss Harriet, who had not been well for the past day or two, glanced out and said querulously—

"No doubt he is already planning a gay life out there. A light nature——"

"But poor Pauline——"

"Pauline's well rid of him, and he'll soon find consolations," snapped Miss Harriet.

"You mean . . . native ladies?" said Miss Amelia, flushing her delicate pink. "Oh, I think not."

"Why not?"

Poor Miss Amelia searched for a ground for her belief in Unwin, but could only grasp the rather feeble conclusion: "Well, he's so fair-skinned himself . . . looks so very clean . . . a black wife. Such a painful contrast."

"Wife! Get me my medicine," said Miss Harriet. "And I might fancy a little scrap of chicken for my supper."

Miss Amelia flushed again, more deeply.

"You wouldn't prefer an egg?"

"I hate eggs after breakfast. You ought to know that by this time," said Miss Harriet. "Really, Amelia, I have left the housekeeping to you since I was not well, but I shall be obliged to take it in hand again myself. I don't know what you do with the money, for you think ten times before buying a fowl, and I always found our allowance ample."

"But you are such a splendid manager, Harriet," said Miss Amelia humbly, flushing until the tears came into her eyes, and her hands trembled. "Our father always used to say you could manage Europe if you could get at it. I can see him now saying it, sitting in that very chair."

"Yes," said Miss Harriet, turning from the subject of the housekeeping allowance. "He appreciated my intellect as neither dear Mother nor you did—but then you were never intellectual, Amelia. I remember you as a young girl, all sensibility and blue ribbons. It is a wonder you did not marry, for men like that sort of thing, I believe."

"You ought to have married a Bishop," said Miss Amelia. "I am sure if any Bishop had known of you he would have come and sought you out. He would have felt it a duty." She paused. "Harriet, if, as some people think, we are placed in a future life where we ought to have been here, you will be in charge of a bishop with a large number of the younger clergy in the immediate neighbourhood. Of course, there will be no marry-

ing or giving in marriage. . . . However, perhaps some other arrangement . . ."

But Miss Amelia was so plainly speaking at random that Miss Harriet stared.

"Really, Amelia," she said, "I sometimes wonder if you are not becoming imbecile. What's the matter with you?"

"Poor young Unwin! I felt so sorry. I have so often seen him pass and, now he is going away," flustered Miss Amelia.

"You can spare your pity then," said Miss Harriet. "I have no doubt he is going down to see that woman."

And indeed, as often happened, Miss Harriet was not far out in her calculations, for a few hours later Unwin actually did walk from the office to the Bowling Green Inn past Delia Lambert's lodgings and slackened his footsteps at her door, uncertain whether to knock or not. Then—it is such trifles which influence all the crises of life—Delia looked out of the window, and that decided him to go in. He felt a sudden, irresistible desire to confide in this woman who understood men, and who would not seek to know more than he wished to tell. He could talk to her about himself, as no man of Unwin's type can do to another man, and he had that longing known to most healthy, normal human beings sooner or later, to remove the barrier set up by years of reticence.

But the mood was subconscious or he would have remained outside, not trusting himself in that shabby armchair by the little open window where a jar of mignonette shaded him from the passers-by. He was quite unaware of any danger and only felt a grateful sense of rest and security as he lit a cigarette after passing one to Delia. She did not rush into conversation but said a desultory phrase or two about simple things. The voices of children playing, the faint, clear sound of Wendlebury beck running over stones behind the row of old cottages, a crow

flying home above the red roofs—all the sounds of the little country town at evening floated through the open window and mingled with the clean fragrance of the mignonette.

Unwin felt as a wounded man may do who first finds himself safe in hospital, and for a little while forgets his sufferings in the heavenly relief of not having to keep it up any longer.

"Playing rounders," he said, nodding in the direction of the voices.

"Yes. They seem jolly," said Delia.

Then they sat silent again, the blue smoke curling about the green heads of mignonette as Delia held her cigarette between her dark, slender fingers.

"You look much better," said Unwin after a time.

"Yes. I'm better than I have been for ages. The simple life suits me, I suppose. And there's something reposeful in the place . . . you can't describe. . . ."

"No," said Unwin. But it was plain enough that even the vagrant Delia was undergoing the Wendlebury change which most people felt sooner or later. Sooner, if they possessed imagination and a quickly responsive nature, but later, anyway, should they remain long enough among the straight-fronted houses beneath the little spire.

Delia was feeling this change or influence to the full as she leaned back on the ugly sofa, but she was not actively conscious of it, any more than of the scent of the mignonette or of the mingled voices of Wendlebury at evening.

"Sometimes," she said, "I think I shall stay here for ever! Just getting older and older until some fine autumn day I drop from the bough; like Miss Amelia."

He smiled.

"Fancy your wanting to do anything like Miss Amelia."

Delia sighed idly.

"Well! it won't last, but it's nice while it does. The wandering spirit will get hold of me again and I shall have to move on. It's in my blood. Heaps of people

are the same. The Wandering Jew was not a celibate, I'm sure, and I do believe he spent a lot of time in England."

Unwin removed his cigarette and sat looking at it. Delia said nothing. At last he spoke casually—

"Well, I'm off, you know. I'm going to join the wanderers."

"West Africa? That's a long trail. Shall you like it?"

He got up and stood by the fireplace.

"I've lost that job, you know."

"Yes. Well, you've got another," said Delia.

"I don't know why Lord Southwater turned me down, but I have had a hint that he thought me unsteady or something of that sort."

"That's impossible," said Delia decidedly. Then she gave a little laugh. "Chubb thinks you too fond of a joke, but Lord Southwater couldn't be such an owl as to deprive a good man of a post for that reason."

"No," said Unwin. "He is a just man. Well, I must leave it. Perhaps somebody else turned up whom he thought more suitable. Or a high church dignitary may have pulled a string. You never can tell. A man with a great deal of power is nearly always capricious."

Silence again, Delia offering no futile condolences, and at last Unwin said, coming back to his chair—

"I suppose you know how I wanted that job? What it meant to me? Not for the money exactly. . . ."

"Yes," said Delia.

"It was the chance of my lifetime," said Unwin. "And I never dreamed for one second that there was any doubt about it. I regarded the appointment as good as made. So you would, if you had heard Lord Southwater talking to me in Wendlebury Church, knowing him for the man he is." He paused gloomily, staring into space. "By Jove! I wonder if that old hag Mrs. Delamere has been repeating any stupid Wendlebury gossip about me."

"But there's nothing for them to gossip about," said Delia.

"They don't wait for that," said Unwin.

"No, I suppose not." Delia sat looking down, preoccupied with something beyond Unwin's misfortune. Then she raised her head suddenly and her long, careless figure under the loose draperies grew taut. "We laugh at gossip," she said. "We might as well laugh at death. It was talk that drove me out into the world at twenty and ruined my life. I was a fool and threw myself at a man's head so openly that people knew. He began the game and I would not realise when he was tired. I can see myself now—poor, little, desperate fool—trapping him on his way home from business. I didn't care if the other men laughed. I would have gone through a world of laughing devils to meet him." She broke off, letting her hands fall with that odd, crooked smile of hers. "Lord! To think I could love like that! And all wasted!"

"You got something out of it," said Unwin.

"Did I? I wonder. Anyway, the town naturally rang with my misdoings and my mother said I had ruined my sisters' prospects in life. People would be frightened to come to the house. So I went. It seemed the only way."

"Your mother must have been very callous," said Unwin.

"No, she was always kind, but she was not very brave, and gossip makes cowards of many brave women," said Delia. "Goodness! If only we could see this minute before us the miseries brought about by talk, I do believe we should find it worse than that produced by drink. But there!" She flicked her cigarette ash. "No more of that subject. I don't know why I let myself go so. I think it's because I have had a lot of time lately to remember things. After all, Wendlebury would not be Wendlebury if people were not so vitally interested in each other."

"I like the little town," said Unwin. "When I first

joined my father, I found it dull after a big city, but there's an atmosphere . . . you could fancy a man beginning something fine here that would never pay and doing it happily all his life. I'm pretty sure you could recapture the love of the work for the work's sake in Wendlebury."

Delia looked at him with deep attention, studying his charming open face as he spoke.

"Yes," she said. "Well, why not try it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Go to Lord Southwater and tell him about his brother. He is a proud man, but not without feeling, any more than any one else. Gratitude will make him do something for you, even if you do not get the post."

"We talked that over before. You know I can't do it," said Unwin. "I wouldn't break a promise to a dead man who trusted me for fifty appointments."

"No, I suppose not," said Delia, then she sighed and got up to light the lamp. "Poor Delamere; he brought unhappiness to every one who was connected with him. And yet—" She smiled suddenly. "I got something out of that too. I was a fool twice, which is unforgiveable. But I'd rather that, than not be able to be a fool at all."

"H-hem! Will you have your blinds down?" said the little dressmaker, peering in with real reluctance but urged by her sense of propriety which amounted to a passion. "People can see inside so clear with the lamp lighted. Not that there is anything in ladies smoking nowadays. Quite the latest, of course. But what is only dashing in Ryeford Terrace gets peculiar in Bowling Green Row, if you take my meaning?"

"I quite understand," said Unwin gravely.

"It's not what you do, it's what people see you do that makes things a little unpleasant sometimes," said the dressmaker apologetically. "I am making a cup of cocoa for Miss Lambert; may I press you to take one too?"

"No, thank you," said Unwin, accepting the hint. "I am going now. I had no idea it was so late."

So the dressmaker retired, aching with curiosity. Her great liking for Unwin could not hide the fact that he was paying marked attentions to two ladies. She did not believe that Miss Pauline Westcott would have at all approved of his sitting there smoking cigarettes at nearly eleven o'clock at night with Miss Lambert. Besides, people would talk.

But Unwin, walking down the quiet streets where drawn blinds gleamed blank in the moonlight, was once more impervious to the talk of Wendlebury. For a moment he had glimpsed the possible importance of it in speaking of Mrs. Delamere and Lord Southwater, but the realisation was so foreign to his temperament that it did not last, and before he had passed the corner of Ryeford Terrace the twittering tongues of the little sleeping town were no more to him than the hushed twittering of the sparrows in the eaves . . . a part of life here and of the familiar, unconsidered day.

His thoughts circled round the woman he had just left. The ravaged, lined face, high cheek-bones and burning eyes, the long figure in the loose clothes which yet seemed made for her and no one else, the magnetic charm which made all she said interesting. He was surprised that she seemed to have been so unlucky in her love affairs, not realising that he himself placed her on a plane far below Pauline because she was capable of giving lavishly with both hands, having no reserves. He was glad to take her friendship and sympathy, but the Romance in him followed an elusive image of Pauline flitting before him down the grey street. Because of the passionate tenderness in her which could, he believed, be found by him alone, he was ready to follow the dream to his life's end.

He pictured himself growing old alone and thinking of her thus beneath the startling moonlight of a foreign land. The clock struck twelve. He stood still, wonder-

ing how long it would be before he heard the bells of Wendlebury chiming out another June.

Then the mood passed and he walked briskly on, his footsteps echoing in the empty streets, determined to waste no more feeling over a girl who could be cold to him because he was unfortunate. Pauline ought to have shown herself kinder than ever before at that first meeting after his disappointment, and she had been embarrassed and cold. She need not fear—he was not the man to pursue a girl against her will on the strength of a half-given promise. There should not be the very least difficulty, even to her delicate, sensitive perceptions, in getting rid of him.

All of which was very contradictory indeed; but if people could see clearly when in love there would be very few love-stories either lived or written—only a straight march from the first thrill to the reserved compartment.

CHAPTER XIV

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

LORD SOUTHWATER walked in his garden at evening feeling subconsciously a brighter red in the geraniums and a smoother green in the lawns because of the departure of Mrs. Delamere after her annual visit. And, being kindly disposed to the Universe, he thought with pleasure of restoring that little church where Pauline and Unwin had suffered involuntary imprisonment. Then his thoughts strayed naturally to the architect, and he regretted very much being unable to employ Unwin . . . a pleasant young man . . . one who had his work at heart. . . . Lord Southwater again felt the spark dormant in himself flash out in response to that bright ardour of the enthusiast which he had so plainly seen in Unwin.

He paced slowly; there was a scent of gathered hay in the air; the world was good, and Mrs. Delamere—for all practical purposes—not in it. He began to wonder if the reports concerning Unwin were altogether true. Lord Southwater was a man of the world, albeit a narrow world, and he did not place too much credence in reports emanating from a little town about a high-spirited young fellow. The Vicar obviously liked and trusted Unwin, though he had not been able to deny that the young man was considered a little wanting in ballast.

Still, the peaceful evening, the sight of his own handsome possessions, the dinner he had recently eaten, all inclined the excellent peer to kindness, added to which he had experienced a difficulty in finding another man to his

mind. He began—as the most high-principled widower may at such an hour—to think with a certain avuncular pleasure of Pauline's face and voice and of what she had said to him. Her charm—which by no means appealed strongly to men as a rule—had almost taken his fancy captive. He felt he should like her to be happy. Finally, he told himself that the strict justice in which he felt such pride made a personal investigation of the matter necessary. He would go quietly and unannounced to Wendlebury during the ensuing week and see what he could find out on his own account. Perhaps he might after all be able to appoint Unwin and the whole affair would thus be completely and satisfactorily settled.

Pauline, meanwhile, was in bed with a bilious attack, the unfortunate and unromantic result in her case of excess of emotion. No girl can feel a heroine even to herself under such conditions, and when she came forth at last, limp and sallow, her one idea was to see Unwin at once and tell him what had been on her mind ceaselessly during all those restless hours. She felt that, come what might, she could not bear the suspense any longer. For she felt sure by this time that Unwin had traced the story of the Green Dragon doorway to her, and that he remained away because he naturally could not forgive her. She must try to explain that it was not quite as bad as it seemed. No, she would not do that. She would just throw herself on his generosity and ask him to forgive her.

Her knees shook a little as she walked along the street, and Aunt Dickson from the window signalled that she would do better to stroll towards the country. But she kept on in the direction of Unwin's office and soon encountered Mary Carter, tennis racket in hand—

"Coming to the club this afternoon?"

"No, to-morrow. I have been seedy," said Pauline.

Mary laughed.

"Well, I like Saturdays best myself. It is nice to have a man or two there. By the way—talking of men—we have Miss Walker sewing for us to-day!"

Pauline smiled abstractedly, anxious to get on.

"That sounds like a riddle. Well, see you to-morrow."

"Of course, if you don't want to hear what Miss Walker said . . ."

"I do! I do! But I'm rather in a hurry. What is it?" said Pauline.

"Only that we need none of us bother ourselves about Unwin's misfortunes," said Mary. "There I was, feeling so sorry for him, and getting mother to ask him to dinner on Sunday, and it appears that he goes and smokes with that fortune-telling woman nearly every night until all hours."

There was a pause.

"Well—nothing so awful in that," said Pauline, with an effort.

"Oh, no. Miss Walker particularly insisted that she acts chaperone in the kitchen and turns him out at eleven," laughed Mary. "Sometimes with cocoa. You can't—as she says—see anything really wrong in an interview that ends in cocoa." She paused. "Dear me! How ill you look, Pauline. You really ought not to be out by yourself."

"I'm all right," said Pauline hastily. "I must get on now."

"Then," said kind, commonsense Mary, "I'm coming with you; that's all. Where are you going?"

Pauline looked down for a moment. Where was she going? Not to throw herself impulsively upon the generosity of a man who could so easily find consolation for her absence in the society of a woman like Miss Delia Lambert.

"To—to the draper's shop," she said, naming a place where she was certain not to see Unwin.

"Right-oh!" said Mary, cheerily putting off her afternoon's amusement.

But as luck would have it they encountered Unwin, and the sight of him caused Pauline to flush so deeply that she looked unusually well. In pursuance of his intention to leave her free—especially if she could look like that while he was broken-hearted—he affected an over-done jauntiness.

"Jolly weather, isn't it? I see you're off to tennis, Miss Carter. You off too, Miss Westcott?"

"Not to-day," said Pauline, her voice sounding very cold because only with a great effort could she control it to speak at all.

"Oh! I expect I shall see you to-morrow then. The ground's in fine condition."

"You have not played much this year so far," remarked Mary.

"No. Must make up for lost time. Not many Saturdays left now. Good-bye."

"Sorry to hear it. Good-bye," said Mary.

So they parted, and he had alluded to his departure after all, which he had not meant to do: while Pauline could have beaten herself for being unable to bring out any word, good or bad, with Mary listening. She could not even offer him the decent civility of an acquaintance and say she was sorry to hear of his departure, because all her strength was needed to keep the door shut on her surging, pressing emotions. She was weak and a little feverish still, and the effort left her so flushed and bright-eyed that Mary said gaily—

"It has done you good meeting Unwin, though you were so distant with him."

"Distant?" murmured Pauline vaguely, her heart thudding in heavy beats against her side.

"Why, yes," said Mary. "But it is only——" She did not continue her sentence, because Pauline was not a person to whom you could say everything, but she felt it quite

proper that a man who had played fast and loose with a girl after the manner of Unwin with Pauline should be received coldly.

"I suppose that Miss Lambert is rather fascinating in her way?" she asked, after a pause.

"Chubb says so," said Pauline, achieving a little laugh.

"You'd hardly expect Chubb and Unwin to have the same taste," said Mary; then putting on a woman-of-the-world tone that went comically with her rosy, round face, she concluded: "Men seem to have a different standard. You never know what they'll fancy, but I believe they're all alike in the end about the sort they do fancy. It's something hidden from a woman that men see. Look at that ugly, serpenty, red-haired Mrs. Bracegirdle . . . and yet they say all the men fall in love with her. It's a mystery, like lots of other things."

And while the two friends walked home again, contemplating with such wide girls' eyes the wonders of love and life, Unwin sat in his office contemplating the same from a man's point of view. But one great difference was that while they wondered, he thought he knew all about love. He decided now that he could do well enough without that sort of thing and that it was an extra in a man's life—like keeping a motor car—whatever it might be for a woman. Still he sat in the meantime, pencil in hand, staring at the blank paper, seeing Pauline's face take form on the dim whiteness and her deep eyes shine out at him in tender inquiry.

So the ceaseless round of love, scorn, indifference, longing, love, went on in Unwin's heart as it has done and will do in every lover's through the ages, seeming little to many who have passed it by, but always big with fate to those who look back on their lives with understanding.

He had now dispensed even with an office boy, so his seclusion was undisturbed. The clock ticked on through the July afternoon—a brief shower slanted across the panes and died again—a boy went past calling strawber-

ries, which are late in Wendlebury—life stretched out before him like a long, dull plain. At last a timid knock sounded on the door and he called "Come in!" but no one entered, so he called again, and a high, female voice answered nervously—

"If you could . . . I'm rather burdened . . . so sorry to trouble you. . . ." Thus he knew that Miss Amelia waited without.

As he ushered her in, striving to relieve her of her parcels, she murmured over and over again: "So sorry . . . I should never have ventured . . . only I felt in this matter I had only you and my Creator to depend on . . . and He, naturally . . . not a thing you could ask . . ."

"Sit down," said Unwin gently, finally removing the parcels and placing them on the table. "It is such a warm day. Rest a little before you begin to tell me."

"Rest!" said Miss Amelia, her pale eyes flooding with tears. "That's just what I can't do, day or night." She pressed her handkerchief to her lips and pulled herself together. "Mr. Unwin, let us be business-like. I—I particularly wish to place this matter on a business footing, if possible. Only——" and her lip began to tremble again, "there can be no business about one side of it—never! Nothing but kindness on your part and eternal gratitude on mine."

From the way in which this last connected sentence came out, following the incoherent rambling beforehand, it was evident that Miss Amelia had saved this spar alone from the wreck of a fine address composed in the solitude of her own bedroom.

"Anything I can do, I shall be only too glad," began Unwin, then, to lighten the situation he added with a smile, "so long as it is not another ghost."

"N-not exactly that," said Miss Amelia, "but still an unpleasantness connected with house-property." She paused and began again earnestly: "Mr. Unwin, you may have noticed that we only contributed half-a-crown to

the School Treat Fund this year instead of our usual guinea?"

"No, indeed," said Unwin. "How should I?"

"The list was published in the Parish Magazine," said Miss Amelia; "I can't think how you failed to notice it." She lowered her voice. "Mr. Unwin, I grieve to say that I told a lie—the first deliberate lie of my life—in connection with that magazine. I said to my sister that it had been accidentally destroyed when in reality I burned it with my own hands. And why?"

"Perhaps you thought it too exciting reading for an invalid," jested Unwin, willing to relieve the emotional tension from which the poor lady was evidently suffering.

Miss Amelia shook her head.

"No," she said, in all good faith, "not on this occasion, though I have known times when there have been letters from the Vicar about the new heating apparatus in the church and so on. . . . But there was nothing controversial in this number." She bent forward until her lightest whisper could be heard and glanced behind her at the door. "It is this. We planned to contribute a guinea as usual, and I gave half-a-crown only, retaining the other eighteen-and-six for household expenses. But this source of extra income is terribly limited, as you will understand, and my sister has to have every luxury and no worry. It is rather singular," concluded Miss Amelia, "how often doctors seem to prescribe that, and how very difficult it is to get. You would wonder sometimes that they did not try to substitute something else which, in the world as it is, one would find more readily obtainable."

Unwin saw that Miss Amelia was chattering nervously on to put off saying what she had come to say, so he only responded: "Yes," and added at once, "Well, what is it, Miss Amelia?"

"My dear father used to say," she began, flushing delicately all over her pink-and-white face, "that a person who discussed his money matters outside the family circle

was entirely without refinement. But—" and the last words rushed forth, desperate and unpremeditated: "If I don't discuss them the butcher and grocer will. The house we own is unlet. The tenant ran away just before the rent was due, and I am not such a good manager as Harriet. I was depending on the money. But now I dare not tell her for fear of a relapse. We are not so rich as we are supposed to be, Mr. Unwin. Indeed, to some people, I daresay we might seem poor, though we have always found our income sufficient," she concluded with a gentle, tremulous dignity which Unwin found touching.

"We must try to find another tenant," he said.

"But that is just the difficulty," said Miss Amelia. "We took the last tenants without a very good reference because the house had got a bad name. We hoped they would live it down. The fact is the last three tenants have all died there. Well over seventy, it is true, but not so very long after taking the house. And you know what Wendlebury is. It takes so little to make a talk."

Unwin laughed indulgently; Wendlebury talk seemed to him such a funny, negligible affair.

"Oh, it will soon blow over, Miss Amelia. I will do my best to find you a tenant if that is what you want," he responded.

She got up and put her hand on her parcels, trembling very much.

"T-that would take time. Weeks, perhaps. I want money now."

In a moment Unwin's cheque-book was out of the drawer —though his assets at the bank were not so large as his careless: "Why, Miss Amelia, that's nothing!" implied.

But he was surprised on looking up, suspended pen in air, to see the rigid little figure by the writing-table.

"No, Mr. Unwin," said Miss Amelia, "I did not come to borrow money of you. I could do that elsewhere. Mrs. Dickson . . . any number of old friends. . . . I came to

ask of you a far more delicate and difficult service. But I will not trouble . . ."

"Miss Amelia," said Unwin, smiling at her in friendly impatient perplexity, "how the dickens am I to know what it is if you won't tell me?"

Miss Amelia hesitated, saw some reason in that remark and flung forth with desperation: "I want you to pawn my jewelry and my christening mug," then waited for the heavens to fall.

"But surely the jeweller would allow you something on them?" said Unwin.

"And have the news flying all over the place that the Miss Pritchards had disposed of their jewelry. No, I would die first," cried Miss Amelia.

"But he would respect your confidence. Or I might take the things and not say who they belonged to," said Unwin.

"When every single one was bought from him or his father or his grandfather!" said Miss Amelia. "And the man would tell his wife or somebody. I should not blame him. He really would not be able to help it," she added, seeing, indeed, that such a stupendous piece of news must burst any ordinary bonds of discretion.

"But the pawnshop man may recognise the things, too," said Unwin.

"No," said Miss Amelia. "I—I obtained news of him —I must confess by a sort of subterfuge—from Mrs. Chubb. And he is from London. He would not know my hair brooch from Miss Argle's, for instance. Jewelry, no doubt, is just plain jewelry to him."

"Like Peter Dunn," said Unwin, still trying to ease the situation.

"Was Mr. Dunn a *pawnbroker?*" said poor Miss Amelia, speaking the low cognomen with reluctance. "I suppose a famous one. I never heard of him." She stopped short and one tear trickled down the side of her nose. "You are naturally reluctant to accept such an

errand. I ought not to have asked it. I had thought of disguising myself and going after dark, but my courage failed me. I can quite well do that still."

"No, indeed," said Unwin. "If you are bent on it, I will take the things, of course."

Miss Amelia glanced at the cheque-book.

"But you must promise to really—er—pawn them," she insisted. "You must not just pretend to do so and lend me the money. That would hurt me very much indeed. I should be sorry I had trusted you. You must please promise?"

"All right, I promise," said Unwin.

Miss Amelia heaved a great sigh of relief and burst openly into tears.

"You're so kind . . . you ought to be happy . . . only the best never are. And I'm sure the hottest climate even with tigers ought not to daunt Pauline——"

"Where shall I bring the money?" said Unwin abruptly.

"If you could—about ten-thirty a.m. outside the fishmonger's?" said Miss Amelia, wiping her eyes. "There is always rather a crowd there on Market Day and our transaction would not cause any remark. People in passing would think it a subscription, no doubt." She went to the door, escorted by Unwin, murmuring incoherently: "I do hope you'll forgive . . . the masterly way in which you dealt with our ghost suggested to my mind . . . I shall . . ." Then she paused, not being glib at speaking of such matters, "I shall pray for you out in Africa, I shall indeed."

Unwin was shaking hands with her at this moment and he felt suddenly impelled to lift the slender withered fingers to his lips, saying in a low tone—

"I hope you will, Miss Amelia."

So they parted, and she went away through the clean grey streets with a little glow at her heart, in spite of Harriet's illness and financial anxiety.

Lord Southwater stepped forth from his mansion, feeling he was a good man, as indeed he was, and a just man —as indeed he intended to be. He entered the waiting car which shone as if to match the owner's shining virtues, and was conveyed, continually patted on the back by his own conscience, to the outskirts of Wendlebury. Here he alighted, commanding that he should be fetched from an appointed place at an appointed time, and walked on his own distinguished legs towards Dr. Carter's house. He knew that a doctor in a little town knows everything even though he never talks about it, and he thought Dr. Carter might be ready to give him some further information about Unwin; but he also vaguely hoped to hear something more as he went about the town, and with that object visited the fishmonger who occasionally sent fish out to Southwater Park, and the chemist who now and then made up prescriptions. Still, it was impossible for him to ask either of these men what they thought of Unwin, and—for him—it was equally impossible to lead up to the subject in an indirect way. So he ordered a piece of salmon he did not require with very great dignity, and a box of voice lozenges, and learnt nothing about anything but the weather.

The day was very hot, and his lordship was beginning to be unpleasantly conscious of his boots when Chubb's cab came slowly down the street. Griselda drooped as she went with an air of ostentatious martyrdom, signifying that she intended to die in harness and go to heaven and make Chubb feel uncomfortable for ever afterwards. And Chubb was intimidated by this attitude, as a man decent at heart ever must be, and he got down and gave her a carrot, and besought her, though without words, to put off going to heaven for the present.

It was at this juncture that Lord Southwater came up, conscious of his boots, and decided to drive to Dr. Carter's. He also recognised Chubb and the patient creature who had conveyed Pauline to his house, and—though this

he did not even hint to himself, for one could not question a cabman on such a subject—he had a last wavering hope of hearing something by accident.

"You seem fond of your horse," he said, standing pompous on the kerb. "It is getting old, but I daresay there is plenty of work in it yet—plenty of work in it yet."

"Isn't old . . . not to say old," grunted Chubb, mounting the box. "Where to, sir?"

"Dr. Carter's." The peer cleared his throat. "Ahem! I expect you have plenty of work. So many ladies in Wendlebury."

"Fair to middlin'," said Chubb. There would only be twopence extra at the end of it all and he was not going to give more than value for money, lord or no lord. Griselda flapped her tail gently. It was as if her soul answered to Chubb's soul: "Hear! Hear!"

"But very few young men," pursued Lord Southwater, getting into the cab. "Remarkably few! Mr. Unwin, for instance, is almost the only one I know."

"Indeed, sir! Gee-up," said Chubb, outwardly all stolid acquiescence, but with his inner being rioting and whooping along a hot trail. So *that* was why his lordship wandered a-foot on the hard pavements of Wendlebury! He had come to inquire about Unwin.

The cab was now passing through a very short street which leads to the market place. A shop stands at one corner, and a public-house at the other. Lord Southwater, averting his eyes from the Pig and Whistle, was gazing full at the pawnship when Unwin emerged with a ticket in his hand. Above his head were the three blatant golden balls. He came out openly, lost to that decent reticence which should, at all events, cloak the questionable proceedings of a gentleman.

Chubb glanced back over a humped shoulder at Lord Southwater, unable to restrain his curiosity. Then some dim, inner feeling of man to man comradeship caused

him to jerk out, as the cab swerved round into the market place—

"You can offens get bargains in them pop-shops. I dessay he was buying himself a second-hand revolver to tek abroad with him to Africa. You have to have one handy fer lions and tigers there."

"Oh, probably," said Lord Southwater, leaning back in the cab. Then he added in a minute or two: "After all, Chubb, I think I will see Dr. Carter on some other occasion. Kindly drive me to the railway station where my car is waiting."

Half an hour later, he was rushing along in the car between the green lawns and bright flower-beds, feeling glad that he had pursued his own investigations independently of his sister-in-law, and reluctantly obliged to own that he had been right—as usual—in his verdict upon Unwin. By the end of dinner this new proof of his own infallibility had almost obliterated his regret.

CHAPTER XV

MORE NEWS

MRS. DELAMERE went about in these days flashing her teeth at Windlebury like a tiger in a cage. And, indeed, she did in a sense endure that position, because Lord Southwater had placed a restraint upon her which she dared not break through. After Pauline's departure from Southwater Park an interview took place upon which Mrs. Delamere still looked back with a sinking feeling, as if she were coming down very suddenly indeed in a powerful lift. For it had been icily terrible. No explanations on her part of the sisterly feeling which had made her watch over Lord Southwater's reputation when dealing with a minx—even to the extent of placing herself in a hideously painful and compromising position—had been of any use whatever. All the impressive majesty gained on countless platforms and rubbed from the pontifical robes of bishops and archbishops had been turned upon her, and she petered—as it were—out of the study, with the knowledge that she must either keep her mouth shut or forfeit the support of the Southwater family for ever. She dared not even *hint* at what she was bursting to say, for fear some rumour of it should come to her brother-in-law's ears, and she let off some superfluous steam—without which relief she must have burst, leaving the fragments, like Jezebel, in Wendlebury market place—by collecting ardently for the Nursing Fund, and thus being able to call on everybody, and hear all the news, without jeopardising her position as a lady who did not visit in Wendlebury.

She even bowed to Unwin, though she had by this time become convinced that he must be a thoroughly unworthy young man—or why did her brother-in-law not employ him after an almost definite promise? And she "moved," as Wendlebury has it, to Pauline, though with a significant stiffness of the muscles at the back of her neck.

But Pauline was too engrossed in her own feelings to notice the fine gradations of a bow from Mrs. Delamere, and she went for interminable walks to avoid Aunt Dickson's kind, anxious glances, not realising how her own self-engrossment was affecting the lonely old woman.

She did not even notice that, as if by some preconcerted signal, the tortoise was touched directly she came in and tea appeared whatever the hour, Aunt Dickson merely saying: "I somehow didn't want my tea before"; or Eva remarking, with her careless fling: "Here's your tea, Miss Pauline; Missus fancied hers soon after lunch."

It was not until long after that Pauline saw how dear and lovely it had all been. The little meal always waiting for her; the knowledge that she was always wanted. Then the interested response to anything she forced herself to tell about the walk—the ready laughter—the sense of always being able to bring hope and fun and joy into this house where she had received so much.

But at the time she only saw the effort it cost her, and felt her mind buzzing like a bee against a closed window at those eleven o'clock festivals, during which the ladies sat round and ate and drank to oblige Aunt Dickson.

But though she was selfish, after the manner of all young people in love, she was not selfish in her love for Unwin. The Wendlebury change in her had transformed her from a will-o'-the-wisp to something so tenderly human, and near all the motherhood in the world, that if she could have given back to Unwin what her tongue had cost him, and been herself put out of his life, she would have done it unhesitatingly. She might have regretted

afterwards, because she was human and there is always a reaction from self-sacrifice, but she would have done it.

On a day in July she came home about half-past five from one of these long walks looking fagged and dark about the eyes. Miss Argle was there, with her black satin bag bulging and the cake plate empty, so Pauline knew that Aunt Dickson had read or become engrossed in a difficult stitch.

"Oh!" said this mild-looking descendant of the free-booters of Argle Towers, dashing nervously at the subject she most wished to avoid; "we were just speaking of Mr. Unwin, Pauline. So pleasant to see that he doesn't mind . . . my nephew, so different . . . refused excellent prospects in India on account of the excess of animal life. But as I always tell him, England seems to be the only country where the lower animalculæ keep their place . . . and we can't all stop in England, can we? No room."

She paused to draw breath, not for lack of matter, then noting with concern Pauline's pale face and dark-ringed eyes she went on again, giving no time for a reply: "He has the true adventurous spirit, no doubt. One cannot judge such men by ordinary standards. Here to-day. Gone to-morrow. I can understand the spirit . . . the Argles, of course . . . though my nephew confines his affections to prize rabbits. It is never wise for a girl to take such men seriously."

Pauline flushed crimson; so that was the opinion of Wendlebury! She hated her own fragile appearance, which she could not control, and upon which any inner emotion drew tell-tale outward signs.

"Does any one take Mr. Unwin seriously?" she said in a light tone.

"No. Oh, no! Not that I know of," said Miss Argle. "Really, that Miss Lambert was in my mind. I hear he is paying attentions . . . a lady, though poor, but, of course, a curious occupation . . . only I hear she has given it up since the summons. Mr. Unwin went with her to the

police-court. Not that *that* proves anything, of course, does it?"

"Summons!" gasped Aunt Dickson. "When did this take place? How is it I have never heard?"

"Oh, they kept it out of the newspaper somehow . . . the Vicar, I believe . . . it all happened the day before yesterday."

"And I saw Miss Amelia this morning! And she never told me!" said Aunt Dickson, deeply hurt by her friend's want of generosity.

"I expect she didn't know. She is so tied with Miss Harriet, you see," said Pauline, forcing herself to speak carelessly.

Aunt Dickson, for all her jolly kindness to the world, chafed like a dog held back from a succulent bone.

"Do go on and tell us all about it now, then," she urged.

Miss Argle glanced from one to the other and took up her familiar black-satin bag.

"Done no fancy-work after all," she murmured. "Really must be going now. My dear Mrs. Dickson, there is no more to tell. Only Mr. Unwin . . . Oh, what was it he did? You know . . . something connected with a boat? Bail! That's it."

"He was always good-hearted," said Aunt Dickson, trying not to look at Pauline.

"Oh, yes; any lady he was friendly with, he would, I am sure . . . even a comparative stranger like myself. . . . I shall never forget his obliging behaviour about the dress-suit when my nephew . . . I wish I could do him a service."

It was Aunt Dickson who replied, while Pauline thought in silence what she and this little lady between them had helped to do with a man's life.

As she conducted Miss Argle, murmuring and guarding her well-filled bag, to the door, she felt bitter against Wendlebury; but beneath her bitterness she saw once more well enough that if she blamed Wendlebury she must

blame the world. Out there, in the crowd and the thick of it all, exactly the same thing had happened over and over again as had happened in this little town. She remembered a great General who had died of a broken heart because of gossip amid the stir and clash of war: Wendlebury was only a tiny bit of the world under a magnifying glass; it was the same everywhere.

"Kettle's boiling, Miss," called Eva over the stairs, putting her walking gown over her scraggy shoulders. "I've put teapot ready."

She was down in a few minutes, hat perky and fine over her long, thin face, a pair of pointed shoes on her large feet, bows and laces on her little flat figure, not to be "downed" by her looks any more than by the rest of life.

"I've laid supper on the big tray," she said, bustling about, "and here's a saucer-cheesecake. You always like a cheesecake, you know. There! I must be off. I've promised to meet a young man at half-past six. I came across him at Ryeford Feast last week. Not that he is exactly young in the sense of being young, but he hasn't got a wife."

"How do you know?" said Pauline listlessly, not because she had the faintest desire to hear, but because there was about her—as those who have followed her fortunes so far may have noticed—a fundamental sweetness of courtesy.

"You're drinking your tea without eating," interjected Eva. "You'll ruin your stummick!" Then she answered Pauline's question. "I knew he was not a married man because I asked him. Once bitten, twice shy. Last but two I walked out with turned out to be a married man with seven. Some folks would ha' given it up after that . . . but not me. I just make sure. So I says to this man, 'Are you married?' I says. And he says, sharp-like, 'What are you asking me that for?' And I says: 'I mean

to start as I mean to go on: all open and above board.' So he told me he was single. But you never know."

"You are comfortable enough here. Why bother?" said Pauline.

"Oh, you must have a bit o' sport somehow," said Eva, taking up a gay sunshade which was purely decorative at that hour. "As my poor mother used to say, 'If you can't have treacle-pot don't be too proud to lick the spoon.' So long, Miss Pauline!"

But Miss Pauline found herself as yet unable to accept the grand philosophy of "Us Martins," and her whole aching soul demanded the treacle-pot.

After a while she went back to Aunt Dickson, but the subject of Unwin and the fortune-teller was not mentioned, though the air of the room hummed almost audibly with the unspoken consciousness of it. Aunt Dickson's true kindness of heart imposed on her this restraint for fear of hurting Pauline—she had been acutely aware of that deep flush of pain during Miss Argle's story—and she exerted herself to talk comfortably of little things because silence seemed to hint indiscreetly at the forbidden topic.

But this state of affairs could not endure throughout a whole July evening, and Pauline's troublesome nerves at last impelled her to end it with a casual—

"Just like Mr. Unwin to go to the rescue of the distressed."

"Yes. What is this Miss Lambert like?"

Pauline hesitated.

"Oh, not young. Some people might think her good-looking." A pause, and an effort. "There is something about her. I could see that."

"Um. Well, Unwin will soon have left here, and I dare say it may be years before we hear any more about him. A nice fellow, but not to be relied on."

So having, as it were, shuffled the cards and mixed

the knave in with the rest of the pack, she tacitly invited Pauline to start afresh.

But a subject, in Wendlebury, is not thus easily dismissed, and when Eva entered the room, still attired in the gay gown, her first words opened it out afresh. She made a feint of removing the bread-and-milk bowl, then put it down again on the table and gave herself up openly to the thrilling situation.

"I went to see Mrs. Chubb, 'm. She's been charing at Miss Walker's to-day—where that fortune-teller's stopping. They've had her up for doing it. Miss Walker, the dressmaker, was in an awful way—awful. They say Mr. Unwin had to go down on his hands and knees to her before she'd let that Miss Lambert stop. She said it would ruin her connection. But she gave in in the end."

There followed a silence, which Eva took for the silence of stupefied astonishment. She regarded it as her due and continued with increased animation—

"Mr. Unwin seems regularly taken in with that Miss Lambert. And she's no beauty, not to my way o' thinking, and won't ever see thirty again. You'd wonder what got him, all the nice young ladies there is in the world," she concluded with an indignant glance in Pauline's direction.

"Young men will be young men," murmured Aunt Dickson vaguely, forced into some kind of reply.

"So they say," retorted Eva. "But when a girl gets into trouble they never say young women will be young women!"

"Mr. Unwin has nothing to be ashamed of in this matter," said Pauline quickly. "You may be quite sure of that, Eva."

"Well, Miss," said Eva, "whether he has, or whether he hasn't, he's made a deal of talk. That's his worst failing, I dessay; he never seems to turn round and think whether he's making talk or whether he isn't. If us Martins had done like that we should never be where we

are to-day. As my poor mother used to say, 'You want to be a dirty tramp like old Jenkins that can't be made out worse than he is, or a rich man like Squire that'll go on bein' rich whether you talk or not, afore you can do things without thinking what folks 'll say about you.' " She paused. "Not that I blame him about Miss Lambert, poor feller. There's Chubb, too. Whatever do you think? He said if she was turned out of her lodgings they'd take her in, and Mrs. Chubb said nothing for fear of hardening him on . . . but to herself she says, 'On'y over my dead body.' For it was one thing him been so taken up with his old mare, but when he began with Miss Lambert . . . And all he says is that she's the perfectest lady he ever met with in all his cab-driving, and he can't say no other. But, of course, that isn't it."

"Eva, I really can't——" began Aunt Dickson.

Eva pursed up her mouth and stared at Aunt Dickson and Pauline with round eyes of mystery.

"I don't mean what you mean. I don't think she goes on with Chubb—nobody in their senses could. But she doesn't only a fortune-tell; she nypnotises. I read a tale about one in the *Wendlebury Herald.* You can't do naught agen 'em, once you let 'em get near-hand you. And it stan's to reason that Mr. Unwin must ha' got nypnotised," she concluded indignantly, "or else he wouldn't give a nice young lady like Miss Pauline the go-by for——"

"Mrs. Chubb talks a lot of nonsense," interposed Aunt Dickson. "I wonder you have not too much sense to listen to her, Eva."

"Well, I'm sorry for Mrs. Chubb," flashed out Eva, defending her sex against the adventuress, as women ever will. "She says she's all of a work inside from morning to night and her food mud as well go down sink for all the good it does her! I wish Miss Lambert had never come near-hand Wendlebury!"

Pauline secretly echoed the sentiment, but Aunt Dick-

son was not so sure; she felt inclined to think that the fortune-teller had done good service to Pauline in showing plainly that Unwin was not a man to be depended on or regretted.

Unwin himself had no idea, of course, that his private affairs were being thus openly discussed, and the affair of Miss Lambert had by no means been so important as Miss Argle and Eva imagined. True, a policeman had called at Delia's lodgings, scaring the little dressmaker into hysterics, but there had been no question of bail, and a fine and a promise had satisfied the authorities. As a matter of fact Unwin's mind was filled with other matters, and he was very busy putting his affairs in order before going abroad. Never having troubled himself about the tongues of Wendlebury, he was scarcely likely to begin now. So he ceased to search for reasons why the appointment had been withheld, taking the view that such speculating was weak and futile, and getting ready to do his best in the job which had turned up.

It could not be said that he was happy at any time during this period, and when he gave himself time to think he was acutely miserable with the baulked agony of a man in the first flush of youth and strength who has come to regard a girl as his future wife. The loss of her, and of the lovely beckoning prospect which Lord Southwater had held out to him, did not embitter him, because the seeds of bitterness lie within and his nature did not contain them. But he knew there was only one such post in the world, and that he had nearly got it, and had lost it. That gave a sense of frustration in his case, somewhat to be compared with the irritating nervous effect of frustrated love, and there can be no doubt that this state of mind directly led to his love-troubles. If he had been as usual he would have been happily engaged to Pauline by this time, and not employed in making imaginary obstacles out of his own foolish pride.

But there seem no limits to the blindness of love, as

Mrs. Chubb was demonstrating in her own kitchen, opening and shutting her mouth like a frenzied fish, and yet not desperate enough to "let Chubb have it," and clear the matter up once and for all, lest he should remove his affections from her. He was, as she deeply felt in that bursting heart behind the decent alpaca, so dreadfully attractive to the weaker sex. It would appear incredible —if a jealous, good woman's imagination were not capable of things a sensational Sunday paper would boggle at— to recount what Mrs. Chubb thought when Mr. Chubb took Delia out for a drive in his cab. And now he was saying, just as if it were a matter of course—

"Miss Lambert wants to see our procession on Feast Day. I've telled her to stand at Market Corner. She'll get a fine view there."

A fine view of what? Mrs. Chubb's interior arrangements, of which Eva had made mention, became so disturbed that they seemed to be waltzing together, but she only remarked—after opening and shutting her mouth twice: "How many white Bisons is going to ride this year?"

"Me and four others. The rest'll go on foot," replied Chubb, with the careless dignity befitting a man whose position in the Ancient and Worshipful Order of White Bisons is too firmly established to need comment. "Mind you iron my gown well this time."

Seething, Mrs. Chubb took from a drawer in the dresser the white nightgown-like garment in which Chubb on these occasions bestrode Griselda.

"You wouldn't," she said, in a deceptively mild voice, "like Miss Lambert to see you with a crease in it, of course."

"No, I shouldn't," said Chubb. Then he lighted his pipe. "Some o' the chaps looks rare an' silly dressed up like that!"

"Ay," said Mrs. Chubb, but she refrained from saying how glorious Chubb's appearance always was on these

annual festivals, and though he did not actually notice this, he missed something—in a vague sort of way—to which he was accustomed.

"Get me my other pipe," he said testily. "This doesn't seem to draw right somehow."

CHAPTER XVI

THE WHITE BISONS

IT is a well-known fact that if a person contracts some unusual illness or suffers some peculiar accident of which he has never heard before, there seems immediately to spring out of the very ground any number of similar cases. Mrs. Jones, whom the sufferer has long known, possesses a hidden cousin who suffers from precisely the same affliction, while a man at the butcher's shop has endured it for years past himself. And the same rule applies to affairs of the emotion and intellect, so it is no wonder that Pauline began to find, all about her, those whose lives had been injured by gossip.

For instance, on this very morning of blue sky and slanting showers with a promise of sunshine—a perfect Wendlebury day—she saw from the window a dirty little clergyman who went past with shuffling feet and bent shoulders. His shiftless incongruity with the bright, bustling alertness of Wendlebury on the great occasion of the White Bisons annual celebration, led Pauline to remark carelessly—

"There's Mr. Robinson again! I don't think he ought to wear clerical clothes at all if he goes about in that state. Why is he not working?"

"Oh, he got into some trouble with his parishioners. There was a lot of talk and he had to retire," said Aunt Dickson, already seated in the window in her best black satin awaiting chance callers from the country.

"But did he do anything wrong?" said Pauline. "I mean, was anything actually proved?"

"No; but there is no smoke without fire," said Aunt Dickson. "However," she added, willing to give, as usual, the benefit of the doubt, "I dare say it was only because he kept white mice and didn't eat meat. People would naturally talk—and when people once begin to talk . . ."

Pauline made no reply, but remained at the window looking after the shuffling figure. She saw now, not just a dirty little retired parson, but a man with the mainspring of life broken by the tongues of his fellow-men, and her heart was filled with an angry pity.

"Can't we ask him in?" she said.

"I have done," said Aunt Dickson, "but he won't come. He likes to be left alone with his pipe. I remember him quite a good-looking young man with a high colour when Wendlebury was his first curacy."

A sudden vision of the old clergyman as he once was rose before Pauline's mind . . . the hopes and aspirations . . . the little red town about the tall spire of the church where he first ministered . . . the glamour of life just opening out . . . and it had ended in this.

"Oh, if people were only born dumb!" she said.

"No, no," said Aunt Dickson comfortably. "Speech is like everything else that is any use—you can do good or harm with it. Look at cotton-wool . . . so soft and comforting . . . and yet you can use it to blow up and kill people."

"But you do at least know when you're using it to blow up with!" retorted Pauline; and Aunt Dickson, unable to pursue the argument, said with perfect equanimity—

"Things are like that. You have to take things as they are."

But it is age alone—or supine youth—which can accept that view, and Pauline still wanted to make things different.

On this occasion, however, the time for introspection was over and the first of a long line of visitors appeared

on the pavement outside. She was that old servant of Aunt Dickson's to whom Pauline had carried gifts on her way to Lord Southwater's, and later, during the whole morning, followed other old servants, with children and mothers and sisters of old servants, down to remote collateral branches. Most of them brought country offerings, and the little straight-fronted house began to smell most sweetly of old-fashioned roses and southernwood and honey, and the delicious aroma from Eva's kitchen caused by constant relays of fresh tea and cakes mingled with it all, until the air about Aunt Dickson was fragrant of nothing else in the world but kindness. She sat in her chair by the window, ringing the tortoise bell, and ordering fresh delicacies from the confectioner's through the telephone, her little dark eyes shining in her big red face, so at the very buzzing heart and centre of Wendlebury Feast that Pauline had to reflect some of the jollity back again, and be warmed by it, like a person standing in the sunshine.

Then, after a cold luncheon, came a detachment of "us Martins" who—truth to tell—rather looked down on "our Eva" because she was in service, they having risen in the world to be lady clerks and post-office assistants and suchlike, while "our Ben" was an engineer at Leeds. But Eva ushered them in with such joy, and was so innocently proud of their ugly, board-school English from which all her own vim and character had been banished, and said so casually: "There I go—our Emm laughs at my broad talk," just to draw attention to the precise correctness with which our Emm spoke, that it would have been a poor heart that did not rejoice with her.

Pauline unconsciously began to take heart and think that something pleasant might after all happen in a world so full of fun and kindness. She went out for half an hour after lunch to see the procession of the White Bisons with that fountain of hope welling up in her for no real reason at all which is the compensation of temperaments

given equally to unreasoning despair; and she laughed to see Chubb majestic on Griselda, though only the night before she had believed she would never laugh any more.

It could not be imagined that Griselda felt comfortable, because she was obviously not up to Chubb's weight, but she staggered along with the meek bombast of a very fat, charitable lady in a very overheated room who is hearing a laudatory speech about herself.

Griselda shared with such an one the profound conviction that she had got on in the world because she was good: the droop of her neck, the very hang of her tail proved that beyond dispute.

But on reaching the corner Chubb relaxed somewhat of his immovable dignity and nodded to a friend in the crowd. Pauline could not see who it was and was turning away, when she felt a clutch on her arm, a whisper stirring the hair over her right ear.

"Did you see that!"

"Why, Mrs. Chubb! I didn't recognise you," said Pauline.

"No wonder. Everything's upside down. Oh! what a Feast Day! Oh! the hussy, her——!"

"But what is the matter, Mrs. Chubb?" said Pauline, beginning to be concerned. "Do tell me!"

Mrs. Chubb swallowed several times, opened and shut her mouth and to some degree recovered herself.

"I dessay it's the 'eat, Miss," she said; "I think I'll be going home."

"But Chubb will be coming back this way in a few minutes—if the mare doesn't sit down first," said Pauline.

"I hope she will," said Mrs. Chubb unexpectedly.

"What!" said Pauline, scarcely believing her ears.

"I mean it," said Mrs. Chubb, nodding. And she added darkly: "If the mare sits down with him and I stand up to him, perhaps he'll begin to see." Then she vanished among the crowd and her mystified hearer went home.

Later in the afternoon, Miss Walker came to sit with Aunt Dickson, while Pauline accompanied Mary Carter to the entertainment at the Assembly Rooms which always closed Wendlebury Feast. It had been instituted many years earlier by a committee of county ladies with the praiseworthy object of keeping the feasters away from less innocent amusements, but those feasters still roystered in public-houses and squealed in roundabouts, and became green in swing-boats, while the decorous part of the community who would in any case be decorous enjoyed an excellent performance for sixpence a head.

On this occasion a female Bracegirdle of the highest county reputation was to show Wendlebury how much leg it was possible to show while still remaining immaculately virtuous, in a dance composed by herself called "Love in the Forest."

Delia Lambert also felt the stir of life and gaiety in the atmosphere and became restless in her little house in a back street. So she threw on a cloak and slipped along to the concert hall thinking she would never be noticed —which shows how little even yet she understood Wendlebury. But at any rate she remained unseen for a time because the room was quite dark and the immaculate Bracegirdle was already pawing the air and shaking a hind leg to intimate joy in the sunrise—see programmes one penny each. This was all very well at first. A sort of amazement at being permitted to see so much of a Bracegirdle kept the audience enthralled and quiet. But when, without moving far from the same spot, the dancer went through fifteen scenes of a very similar nature, only shaking more leg and more arm, or frowning instead of showing her teeth, the few genuine feasters at the back began to recover from their amazement and to grow restive. And when, pursuing the limelight which declined to pursue her, the lady dropped on the floor, where she appeared to be contorted with agony, an inebriated voice

at the back called out: "She's had sour braimberries i' wood! Hee! Hee! There's nought gives you it worse than sour braimberries!"

"Hush!" hissed the front benches.

"It's dancing. The lady's dancing, ye fool!" urged a neighbour.

"Dancing!" said the man, without any animosity, but loud enough to be heard by all. "Ca' that dancing! I call it sillying about in 'er shift!"

Then somebody threw a bouquet, and the curtain went down and the lights went up, while the Rural Dean, sitting in front of Pauline, continued to applaud robustly and openly, as though to show every one that he, at any rate, saw those solid Bracegirdle limbs fully draped with the mantle of an hereditary chastity. He looked round at the audience as he clapped his well-kept hands, turning his blue eyes and high-coloured face here and there and brandishing, as it were, in his own person, the precept that to the pure all things are pure. Mrs. Rural Dean leaned back and did her duty languidly by Dr. and Mrs. Carter, giving Mary Carter the opportunity to murmur in Pauline's ear—

"Well, of all things! I don't know how she ever could. I do hope she'll catch cold in her legs. Why does she do it? But I suppose she wanted people to see that the rest of her was not quite so plain as her face."

"Oh, some people like it. Men do . . . anything with legs," said Pauline vaguely, catching sight of Delia Lambert a few yards away.

"But why should they?" urged Mary, pursuing her problem.

"I'm sure I don't know. There are lots of things . . ."

"Oh!" interrupted Mary, also discerning Delia. "That woman! She's just as bad in another way. How dare she come here amongst us as bold as brass after being taken up by a policeman and all the talk!" She broke off abruptly. "Here's Unwin!"

Pauline turned and saw him come through the side-door with his gay, alert air, which was really a physical attribute, his quick, wide-open eyes glancing here and there in search of some one. At last they fell on Pauline; but with a sudden, overwhelming impulse of shyness she turned away. The next second she turned round ready to bow, but it was too late, and he was already making his way to Delia between the rather sparsely filled benches at the side of the room.

The whole thing—Pauline's instinctive retreat, Unwin's momentary pause between the two girls, his choice of Delia—was over like a flash; and yet it belonged to the essential part of earthly love which must be always the same. Pauline had been as natural as a girl flying before her lover in the dawn of the world, and she had looked away because she was seized in the recesses of her being with a sudden, passionate worship for Unwin's virile young body. This feeling was so new to her—physical love fused with her girl's love-of-the-spirit which had been long waiting—that she now sat trembling with the surprise of it.

Then she heard through the rushing sound in her ears —the unforgetable sound of the sea of love rushing on to the shores of life—the indignant voice of Mary Carter.

"Well! I didn't think it of Unwin! He has gone and sat down by that woman."

"I daresay he is sorry for her. He is so good-natured," said Pauline, trying to speak in her ordinary tone.

Mary gave a contemptuous snort.

"Good-natured! He went to sit next her because he wanted to. I know enough about men for that. Perhaps she is interesting. She ought to be. She has had plenty of time to learn things," said Mary, hot with indignation on Pauline's account. "But I don't see how any one can admire her appearance. High cheek-bones, flat nose, dozens of little lines round her eyes, a long, loose lanky figure. I call her downright ugly."

Mrs. Chubb, enjoying her sixpenny worth at the back of the hall, thought the same thing, and she remarked to Eva, who sat near: "Now you see! If that isn't nypnotising, what is? Unwin come in and looked round, hesitating-like, and then went for her as straight as a die. Just the same as folks did when that conjuring fellow was here. If Unwin wasn't nypnotised, what was he? Eh?"

"That must be it," assented Eva regretfully, eyeing with sympathy Pauline's back hair. "Ay; love's a rum thing, Mrs. Chubb."

"You're right there," sighed Mrs. Chubb. Then she added, violently for her: "Nobody could see aught in that great, gawky lass if they wasn't nypnotised. That shows! You can't blame the men!"

"I do," said Eva, ever prone to support her own sex. "Men shouldn't go near enough to get hypnotised. They should keep out o' the way of such-like women. There's plenty of others knocking about. I knew a housemaid where I lived once—a great gawk with ginger hair—and yet all the fellers was after her. She got my young man or else I might have been in a home of my own now. And yet she didn't want to keep him."

"What's happened to your last?" asked Mrs. Chubb, feigning interest but with a vindictive eye on Delia all the time. "He seemed a decent sort of chap but for his bow legs."

"Oh, I parted from him in June, a bit before the longest day," responded Eva cheerfully. "It was in the course of nature, as you may say, for he started walking out with me in January when it was dark and he couldn't see me very fair—you know what Wendlebury street-lamps is—and as it got lighter, he got cooler. So at last, when he'd kept me waiting at street corner twice and never turned up I thought it was time to know where I was. I hate beating about the bush. So I says: 'Are we walking out or are we not?' Plain out. Just like

that. And he says: 'Since you put it to me, Miss Martin'—he talked very fine, you know; a real, good-educated feller, I will own—'since you put it to me, Miss Martin,' he says, 'we are not!'" Eva paused to take breath and give half an ear to a glee. "That was a bit of a blow, wasn't it?"

"And what did you say?" asked Mrs. Chubb mechanically, her gaze still fixed on Delia.

"I said 'What for?' But I knew all the time without telling. I wore a tasty hat of Miss Pauline's and a veil and a fur tie when I first got on with him, and I'm chirpy enough, and he thought me younger and better-looking than what I am. But them long, light evenings end o' May and June!" She sighed. "However, what is to be, will be. I got to know a policeman last night out." She paused again, then added with a vicarious triumph which showed her sound and sweet to the core: "Our Emm's engaged to a clerk. He wears a white shirt and striped socks every day. She got more schooling than I did, and she'll keep his position up all right."

But Mrs. Chubb was gazing at the programme: "The next is the last," she remarked. "Should we slip out after this? I hate being scrooged and Chubb will be wanting his supper."

"As you like," said Eva, "though I don't mind a bit of a crush myself; makes you feel you *are* out, if you know what I mean."

Still, as Mrs. Chubb persisted, they slipped out through the side door. Delia, who also disliked being crushed, followed with Unwin.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Chubb," she said in passing.

"Where's Chubb?" said Unwin pleasantly. "You ought to have brought him."

"Hard-working man . . . something better to do . . . trapesing about to concerts," muttered Mrs. Chubb, with a baleful eye on Delia.

"Oh! he would have enjoyed it. Sorry he didn't come," said Delia lightly.

So she and Unwin went on together through the little crowd round the door, and as they paused a moment in the street beyond they could hear an old roundabout wheezing out a tune which dated from the Boer War—"Good-bye, Dolly Grey"—the tune to which this generation first re-sung the eternal ballad of fighting men going forth to war and the girls they leave behind them. Lights from stalls and booths made a blaze of light beyond the market place, there was a mingled sound of footsteps, voices and laughter, the little town held carnival for all the country-side in this flowery space between haytime and harvest.

Delia drew a long breath, enjoying the cool night. The nervous restlessness which had driven her to the concert gave keenness to her senses now, and made her respond to the merriment in the air. A lad and a girl went rollicking by, full of young life and joy in the passing hour.

"Let us go too," she said, seizing Unwin's arm impetuously. "Come on! Let's follow the fun!"

Unwin, though so in love with Pauline, responded to the challenge of that hand on his arm and that inspiriting voice.

Follow the fun! It was what Delia had always done, with what tragedy in between.

As Unwin raced along the grey streets of Wendlebury with her now, he pressed the eager, nervous hand to his side and felt that here was a fine companion. You could imagine her wounded, beaten, and yet stumbling up again to follow the fun. What a glorious companion for a wanderer! His thoughts broke short on that and paused a second, startled. Where had he got to? Then his reason maintained doggedly that she would be a good comrade for a wanderer in life.

He looked into her face, which was nearly on a level with his own, and saw her looking at him with a smile.

"Want to go back?"

He pressed her hand closer.

"No . . . want to go on!"

"Sure?"

"Quite sure, Delia."

She pulled her hand away, still smiling.

"I didn't mean that, you know. No child-stealing done here!"

He flushed angrily for a moment, being still young enough to feel annoyed, then he began to laugh.

"Well! that's what you'd call applying the break with a jerk," he said; then he added in another tone, "You're a good sort, Delia."

"Oh!" she began, then changed her mind and said at random: "Look at that fat couple going through the gate. However did they achieve that? I suppose they let their minds fatten first and then it spread outwards—or do you think it acts the other way on?"

"Depends . . ." said Unwin vaguely, listening not to her but to the long-forgotten phrase of an old nurse which was for some reason echoing and re-echoing heavily through the long corridors of memories. "If you can't have what you want, Master Maurice, you must make the best of what you've got. . . ." He saw himself again—the turbulent urchin desiring always the unique—and yet did not know why the words should come back so vividly just now. Then the crowd pressed round them and Delia allowed him to take her arm again, and they were thrown up, like weeds at the edge of surf, close by the round-about.

The feast was nearly over for the year and the men and girls flung themselves for a last turn, laughing and shouting, upon the old-fashioned wooden horses which went round rocking clumsily to the tune of Dolly Grey. The air was full of love-making and laughter, rosy faces and bright eyes formed a very procession of youth between the naphtha glare from a sweet-stall near and the gas-jets

of the roundabout; long streamers of pink and white paper flew out like garlands. Unwin and Delia were carried away by this simple pageant, hung breathlessly laughing on the edge of it, called to each other in loud, happy voices like all the rest, taking it for granted that they, too, must join in.

"Me for that brown horse with the rolling eye!" cried Unwin.

"No! No! There's that grey one just like Griselda. I must know what Chubb felt like this morning when he bestrode Griselda," said Delia.

"Now! Now!" shouted Unwin, making a dash for a pair of vacant steeds.

"Nearly missed them," panted Delia, seated victoriously amid a crowd of untiring equestrians.

Then the music brayed, the thing began to whirl—shouts, shrieks, laughter, paper streamers flying out—they were no longer spectators, but a part of all this splendid, whirling, shouting procession of youth.

One round—two rounds—three rounds—with the showman yelling that this was the last, and a final stop which left a clear space for midnight to chime out over Wendlebury town.

As Unwin and Delia walked away from the roundabout he took her arm now as a matter of course, and they jostled along with the other home-going couples, calling, laughing to each other, Unwin as little self-conscious as the farrier's lad in front of him. But Delia's introspective spirit soon returned to its place, watching. Again she was the one to draw away.

"Well, so long as we can get *that* out of a jolting country roundabout we are not really to be pitied," she said, "whatever happens to us. We get more than our share."

"Why did you do that?" said Unwin sharply, not heeding her remark.

"Do what?"

"Take your arm away."

Delia laughed.

"Why, because we're not Siamese twins. We can't go about always linked together."

There was a silence. Unwin felt as if somebody somewhere—it was certainly not the woman by his side—waited tensely upon his reply.

"No," he said at last; "I suppose not."

They walked on again, talking but with a difference, encountering everywhere other couples and groups of returning revellers. As they knocked at the door, Delia suddenly remembered Miss Walker.

"Goodness! I forgot all about her. She will have been sitting up all this time, poor old thing!"

And the little dressmaker unlocked the door, saying with severity—

"S'ange time o' night. Not uthed to thuch hours, Mith Lambert."

For one moment Unwin thought that Miss Walker, too, had been making a night of it. Then he remembered the false teeth.

"Good evening," he said.

"You here!" said Miss Walker. "S'cuse me!" She whisked round and turned after a pause with her teeth in place. "A lady living alone has to be particular. I am not used to such doings."

"It was a concert. Surely music is all right," said Unwin.

"*Not* music accompanied by wooden horses and streamers of white and pink paper," said Miss Walker. "No, Mr. Unwin, you know Wendlebury better than Miss Lambert does, and you'd no right to lead her astray."

"I won't do it again," said Unwin humbly.

Miss Walker shook her head, mollified but still disapproving.

"Well, it isn't for myself, you know. I don't believe any harm of either of you. But the pity is that you

should want to do such queer things. Nobody could imagine the Vicar or Mrs. Delamere wanting to ride on a roundabout. And if *they* don't . . .''

She left it at that and closed the door upon Unwin.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DAY AFTER

A LIGHT drizzle fell next morning and stray pieces of paper blew forlornly about the streets. The milk-lad "cheeked" the news-girl, not jocosely as usual but with a sub-acid irony, and the news-girl asked Eva "if she was going to be kep' waiting all morning because other folks was sleeping off feast." Eva, irritated by the fact that it was washing-day and Mrs. Chubb behind time, gave the news-girl what is called "a dressing-down" and retired to quarrel with the fire-irons, so that Aunt Dickson and Pauline breakfasted to a salvo recognised by the whole household as the prelude to a storm. It was altogether a sort of temperamental house that Jack built, with the jollity left out, that morning in Wendlebury.

The White Bisons, suffering no doubt a reaction from the high splendour of yesterday, felt in tune with the rest of the town: while Chubb, as senior and prominent Bison, was naturally a Bison with a very sore head. Mrs. Chubb applied the grease of flattery with little effect, and Griselda munched, meekly morose, in her stable. She reflected that she was not meant to draw a cab but to be always walking with dignity through Wendlebury market place, bearing Chubb in a white nightgown.

Said Mrs. Chubb, within the house—

"Drat those apron strings! I'm late for Mrs. Dickson's"

"What care I for Mrs. Dickson?" retorted Chubb. "Where's my pipe. You gone and moved my pipe. If

on'y a man could have a place to his-self——" He paused and added bitterly: "But, no. If women was outer the way men would be too happy. That's why it is. Providence didn't want us to be as happy as all that upo' this earth, or else we shouldn't be ready to leave it."

"I'm sure you'd be very uncomfortable without me, Chubb," said Mrs. Chubb. "Who'd mend your socks? Who'd——" she broke off. "There's your pipe sticking out of your breast-pocket all the time."

"I never put it there. I never did put it there i' my life," said Chubb, taking it out and frowning at it.

"Who did then? Sperrits?" said Mrs. Chubb: then she turned a sallow red and giggled with nervous defiance. "P'raps your pipe's been nypnotised too!"

Chubb glared at her over the lighted match.

"Watcher mean?"

Mrs. Chubb—that strange mixture of garrulousness and secretiveness—opened and shut her mouth twice and at last said feebly, "Oh, nothing!"

The outer door closed upon her, and she had trailed some ten steps down the street when the flood-gates of speech were so pressed upon by an insistent thought that she was obliged to return, put her head through the door, and shrill forth huskily: "If I was to die you'd be married again in a year."

Chubb looked at her with the annoyance usually inspired by people who go away and come back.

"I dessay I should," he replied shortly. "You wouldn't want me to cook me own dinner, would you?"

"But you'd be sorry? You'd put me a good headstone up?" pursued Mrs. Chubb. And something in her anxious gaze—some hint of the desperate, ridiculous devotion in her heart—did penetrate through many things to the man at the core of Chubb.

"Ay, lass," he said. "I'd tek the money we've saved for a porch and put you up a real good 'un—so I would!"

"With 'dearly beloved first wife' on it?" said Mrs.

Chubb. "Then all comers 'd know the second was only a second."

"Well," said Chubb, "I think I should wait until I got a second, and then stick in 'First' like you do when you miss a word outer a letter. It'd look so bad to put it on straight away . . . as if I was on the lookout for another a bit over quick."

"But you'll remember to put it in when the time comes," urged Mrs. Chubb.

"Yes," said Chubb.

"Promise faithful."

"I'm a man of my word," said Chubb. "What I say I'll do, that I do." Then he changed his tone, subconsciously sore and miserable at the mere thought of losing her. "Laying down the law about your own tombstone now," he grunted. "Upon my word I don't know what you'll be up to next. Let me get away to the stable."

He hurtled out of the door and down the street, a Bison with so sore a head now that he nearly charged into poor Miss Amelia, who was coming round the corner with a jelly for a sick woman which had been originally sent to Miss Harriet, and which that exacting invalid had termed glue and dishwater.

"Fine morning though dull," tinkled Miss Amelia pleasantly in passing; and Chubb, bursting with strange oaths, felt that this was indeed a world in which men such as he had to respond with some degree of civility: "Dull morning, Miss!"

If Miss Amelia had been in her usual frame of mind she might, being sensitive to such things, have noticed the irritability in the air that morning. But she was, in a way, like Una among the lions, being engrossed with an inner joy which kept her immune from outside disturbances. For a letter had come by the early post saying that the large house belonging to the sisters had found a tenant of unimpeachable antecedents and character who would probably remain in it for some years, and Miss

Amelia was indeed praising God with the best member she had—which was certainly not her tongue—as she hurried through the grey streets. Her heart gave forth a hymn of thanksgiving as simple and as real as that of birds in the hedgerows beyond Wendlebury, and she had no doubt that the favourable let was a distinct answer to many prayers said in the white bedroom once haunted by Mary Jane. A life with a faith like Miss Amelia's is set to such a lovely tune that it is always catching vibrations from the high rooms of heaven.

All the same, she felt a little perturbed by the time she reached Ryeford Terrace, despite a cup of tea in prospect and a piece of pleasant news to tell. For she had met Mary Carter on the way and had heard how Unwin, pausing Paris-like between two girls, had publicly tossed the apple of his open regard to Delia Lambert.

"Not that Pauline cares. As good fish in the sea . . ." Mary Carter had concluded. "Girls don't bother about admirers as they did in your day, Miss Amelia. At least there's a sort that does, but all the rest don't." She paused and added with absolute truth: "I'm sure I don't. Too busy to bother my head. So long as a man plays tennis well, that's all I mind."

"How sensible!" Miss Amelia had responded, but she was now approaching Aunt Dickson's house with a certain knowledge, derived she did not know whence, that the "as good fish in the sea" principle would never apply to Pauline. Some subtle bond of sympathy between the highly educated modern girl trained in a London office and the old country woman who had never gone further than compound long division, made her know that Pauline belonged to the women whose heart's lock only one key will fit.

This company is a larger one than some think, and members of it may be met all over the world, so that in old English villages and New England towns and hotels in Switzerland you may see charming and pretty old maids

—a pretty term so mishandled—on every side. You may hear the same remark; "I wonder why she has never married!" offered everywhere like a bouquet of roses to some oldish, unmarried woman: and the reason is that the man with the key either never met her, or was so busy looking at some one else he did not see her, or he has proved unfaithful or died; and no other can open the door of that closed heart.

It was Pauline's misfortune to be of this company—a misfortune because the happiness of married love becomes dependent on a single chance—so Miss Amelia, who knew all this without being aware of her knowledge, felt perturbed as she went up the little garden, though she nodded to Aunt Dickson at the open window with a face wreathed in smiles and fluted out cheerfully—

"We have let our house! I had to pop in and tell you the good news."

Instantly, it was Aunt Dickson's house that had been let, and Aunt Dickson's money troubles lightened—though she never had any—so eagerly did she rejoice with Miss Amelia.

"Tea!" she cried, pressing the tortoise until the electric bell whizzed through the house and Eva came running, hands red with soap-suds, aware somehow that something nice had happened, and that she must hasten to carry round the Wendlebury substitute for nectar amid that atmosphere of Olympian festival which Aunt Dickson seemed able to create out of nothing.

"Eva you will be glad to hear that Miss Amelia has let her house," said that lady at once, bursting with the good news. And there in a single sentence you had it. Eva was so jolly responsive even on washing-day, finding nothing a trouble, because she was so intimately a part of it all.

"Well! Miss, that is a blessing," she said, beaming on Miss Amelia. "But we must all have our ups an' downs, I s'pose, and the only way is to take 'em as they

come. It's no use, as my poor Mother used to say, for to cry at night because it isn't next morning." She paused, lowering her voice to the confidential note. "One thing always puzzles me, though. At least it would if I went on puzzling, but I don't. Same as them metal rings that you try and try and can't, until you want to chuck 'em at somebody's head. Nobody can't puzzle you with 'em if you put 'em down and won't be puzzled, can they?"

"No," said Miss Amelia politely, beaming with Eva because of her excellent qualities.

"But it does seem to me," pursued Eva, "that there's two sets of folks in the world, them that gets hit and bounces, and them that gets hit and stops flat." She lowered her voice still further. "And it would seem to me, if I wasn't a believer, that Them Above hits the bouncey sort more than the others for the fun o' seeing 'em bounce—for that kind always gets more knocks." She took up a tray and went towards the door, not noting the shocked expression on Miss Amelia's face. "All the same, I'm glad I was born a bouncer."

"Oh, here is Pauline," said Aunt Dickson, glad to change the subject because of the worried look on Miss Amelia's face, which showed her to be striving, in spite of the word of warning, to solve the theological puzzle set by Eva. "Now, talking of puzzles always reminds me of Mrs. Delamere: she brought me one last week. And I want Pauline to tell you that tale about her and the fortune-telling lady."

Pauline frowned.

"I only told it to amuse you," she said quickly. "The whole thing happened some time ago. It is not worth repeating."

But Miss Amelia perked up, growing a little flushed and bright-eyed.

"You don't mean to say that Mrs. Delamere had her fortune told? Why, she must be contemplating a second alliance." For even when absent the great lady of Wen-

dlebury demanded from simple Miss Amelia a certain choice of language. "Who can it be? Not—not the Duke? He is a widower and I saw him speak to her at the Castle Flower Show in June. I am sure . . ."

"Stop! Oh, please stop!" cried Pauline, half laughing and half annoyed. "I did not say that Mrs. Delamere consulted Miss Lambert about her matrimonial prospects. She went on quite a different errand."

"Who told you so?" said Miss Amelia, evidently clinging to her own idea.

"Mrs. Chubb."

"Ah!" Miss Amelia gave a tiny sigh of relief which said plainly, "Only Mrs. Chubb!" Then she continued: "Mrs. Chubb could not know. She could not be there."

"But she was," boomed Aunt Dickson, enjoying the dramatic full stop.

"It was in this way," explained Pauline, anxious to get in the plain tale. "Mrs. Delamere called on Miss Lambert asking her to do palmistry for nothing at an afternoon party on behalf of the Working Guild, and Mrs. Chubb chanced to be cleaning in the passage with the door open."

"So like Mrs. Chubb," murmured Miss Amelia; "and what did Miss Lambert do?"

"Well," said Pauline, "she refused."

"Shy, perhaps," said Miss Amelia. "And what happened then?"

"Mrs. Delamere went at once and complained to the police authorities," said Pauline. "That was, I suppose, the real reason Miss Lambert got into trouble."

"Ah! I remember; the time when Mr. Unwin went to the rescue," said Miss Amelia. But noticing how the blood rushed into Pauline's face at this bracketing of Unwin and Delia she became anxious to make amends and continued rather incoherently: "Of course, any gentleman . . . beauty in distress . . . at least a graceful figure though high cheek-bones . . . impossible to avoid coming

to her assistance. . . . Nothing in it at all, no doubt."

"Mr. Unwin is very friendly with Miss Lambert, I believe," said Pauline steadily, trying to ignore her own burning cheeks. "He could do no less than give her any help in his power."

"Yes . . . always so kind . . . Mary Jane. . . . But," she added wistfully: "I sometimes wish I had never interfered with Mary Jane. I sometimes think that a ghost, even if you only think it a ghost, is better left alone."

"But why?" demanded Aunt Dickson.

"No reason, exactly," said Miss Amelia, sighing again, for she was feeling responsible, via Mary Jane and the chain of incidents which followed, for Pauline's unsuccessful love-affair. The two young people first drew together during that episode, and now dear Pauline, like herself, seemed about to lose the sweetest thing in life. She could have found it in her gentle heart to administer rat poison to the innocent Mary Jane, could such an act have put events back as they were before.

She rose, therefore, vaguely sensible that this murderous frame of mind was not one in which to converse with an invalid—a person always by some inverted rule supposed to be better than others with every excuse for being worse—and so sighed herself out of the room and down the clean steps again into the street. A few yards away she turned round to look back affectionately at Pauline, who had just ushered her out with the gay tenderness which refreshes tired elderly people like the hearing of clear water on a hot, dusty road—but only if it springs up from the heart, otherwise it is like the irritation of water dripping from a tap out of order.

Pauline, however, possessed this natural tenderness for old people, and their need of her in some way dispersed that reserve which was apt to set her apart from those nearer her own age: a reserve of which she herself remained quite unconscious though she knew that she was

no good, as she sometimes regretfully said, at making friends quickly.

But there was a true friendship between the girl on the doorstep in her grey muslin gown and the lady stepping down the street between the narrow grey houses edged with flowers beneath a grey sky—a little harmony of things not splendid but somehow lovely.

Miss Amelia paused before her own house in passing and hesitated, face flushed, delicate features working; the very cat on the railing, blinking at her with one eye, knew that she was in the throes of some desperate struggle between "I will" and "I really can't." The cat, who tepidly liked Miss Amelia, purred gently: "Don't, then, don't! Keep your own corner. Take your own ease. Why worry?"

Under this insidious influence Miss Amelia took two steps towards her own safe, comfortable corner, then the thought of Pauline's face when Unwin and Delia were mentioned together stirred the "I will" into action and she trotted hurriedly round the corner into the market place. Several people spoke to her in passing, and she gave such vague answers that they turned round, looking after her, to remark that Miss Harriet's illness seemed to have aged poor Miss Amelia.

At last she turned into the road near the Bowling Green Inn, and, hearing from afar the familiar, raucous "Mary Jane," she clenched her slender fist in the black kid glove with fingers a little too large and hissed between her lips: "You odious bird! If I could not say more than that, I would keep quiet." Immediately the Jackdaw obliged with "Damn your eye!" and having ended his vocabulary relapsed into silence.

Miss Amelia shuddered slightly. This did indeed seem a fitting prologue for the visit she was about to pay. A faint sulphurous smell from a gas-works not far off completed the illusion. She knocked at the respectable door of the little dressmaker with a subconscious feeling that

a gentleman in red, with horns, hoofs and tail might open it, and when Delia appeared she was only partially reassured, for a person who could hypnotise Unwin and Chubb might also, no doubt, if she wished, exercise her nefarious powers on the female sex.

This was not what Miss Amelia thought—for she was a decently educated maiden lady of modern times—but it was what she felt; and, fear being always more concerned with feeling than conviction, her voice shook as she quavered out nervously—

"Are you at home? At least, I see . . . If I might . . . I wish to speak to you on a private matter of some importance."

"Come in," said Delia. "But you know I have undertaken not to do any more fortune-telling in Wendlebury. You would hear that I nearly got run in because of my palmistry?"

Miss Amelia's failing resolution was stiffened a little by this casual and barefaced mention of an episode, which any right-minded female would know to be an unspeakable disgrace.

"I did, indeed, hear," she said in a tone which caused the pleasant smile to fade from her hostess' face.

"Pray sit down," responded Delia, and so obviously waited to know Miss Amelia's business that the poor lady —blinking her eyes and feeling like an inexperienced diver about to dive into deep water—said, breathlessly plunging—

"Wendlebury is a place where a good deal of gossip goes on."

"Yes?" said Delia.

"I thought—I thought, perhaps—you did not know this."

"As Wendlebury is in the world I could scarcely help knowing it."

"London——" Miss Amelia choked a little, desperately,

as it were, keeping her head above water. "London—such large places—they don't, I believe."

"There's no greater gossip shop than the House of Commons, I am told," said Delia, refusing to help Miss Amelia at all.

"But not—not about the same things—about ladies and gentlemen who are not engaged or married being too friendly, for instance?" gasped Miss Amelia, going under, head and all. But Delia felt no pity for the little trembling lady; she was gripped by a bitter remembrance of that early girlhood, when "talk" had driven her away from the safe shelter of her own home into a world where she had suffered so deeply and had found in the end only the faults of the outcast. She looked back past Miss Amelia, down the years, and saw the girl she was then, with grave faults indeed, but high possibilities; she felt a sudden impulse to punish this woman who came babbling to her of Wendlebury gossip, trying to spoil the best and cleanest friendship she had ever known.

"I suppose," she said at last, "that the friendship of ladies and gentlemen—as you so prettily phrase it—as the source of gossip is universal. It binds in happy communion those wearing bearskins and eating blubber with others eating rice and wearing nothing at all. An interesting thought."

"Yes, indeed," murmured the distracted Miss Amelia. "Oh, most interesting, of course . . . Child's guide to knowledge . . . I well remember wondering how the Esquimaux could possibly . . . oil always makes me so bilious even in salad. . . ." She breathed deeply, a wild effort to get back to her purpose by tactful degrees. "Now some people never suffer from biliousness . . . I should say Mr. Unwin . . . such a clear complexion . . . shouldn't you?"

"I have never asked him," said Delia. "I will remember to do so. He has no woman to look after his health, poor fellow!"

Miss Amelia clasped her hands and took the opening provided for her.

"No single lady has any right to look after any single gentleman's health unless they are engaged, Miss Lambert. Do I understand that you and he . . .?"

"You do not," said Delia; "at least from me. But you sent Mr. Unwin some black-currant jelly when he had a cold without being engaged. And I am sure you would never be guilty of an impropriety."

"That is different. I am an old woman compared with Mr. Unwin," said Miss Amelia.

"So am I," said Delia.

"Oh, yes," agreed Miss Amelia readily; so very readily that the irresponsible Delia gave an involuntary inward chuckle which suddenly changed her black mood into a mere malicious desire to torment the inquisitor.

"You have come, in fact," said Delia, "like a lady of melodrama to ask me to release Mr. Unwin from my clutches. Is that not so?"

"Oh, no . . . I did not mean . . . I only feared you might not realise . . ." fluttered Miss Amelia. "I thought we might perhaps just talk things over in a friendly way."

Delia rose and went to the mantelpiece, whence she took a cigarette case and a box of matches.

"Well," she remarked, "I am ready to hear what you have to say. But no self-respecting villain or villainess ever talked a situation over without a cigar or cigarette. A pipe never seems to aid the course of intrigue, there is something so warmly human about it—besides which I am sure that even your interest in Miss Westcott would never induce you to smoke a pipe."

"Miss Westcott! I never mentioned Pauline's name," said Miss Amelia.

"No, but she was like the old Emperor of China, all the more potent for not being spoken of," said Delia, holding out the case. "Won't you take one?"

"No, thank you," replied Miss Amelia, rising with dignity.

"But I am afraid you can't get to know anything from me without taking a cigarette," said Delia. "I am very sorry, but I cannot become confidential now unless the person I am talking to is also smoking. A matter of habit, of course, but there it is. Habit, as you know, Miss Amelia, is the strongest chain that binds the human will."

"But I can't—I don't know how," said Miss Amelia, almost whimpering.

"Then I can't, either. So we come to a deadlock," said Delia, with decision.

Reluctantly, tremblingly, Miss Amelia held out her hand and took a cigarette, holding it as if it were red-hot, and indeed the thought passed through her confused brain that if this were not holding a candle to the devil it was at least lighting a cigarette because of a lady too intimately acquainted with him. Only her love for Pauline could have made her stammer forth as she did—

"W-which end? I-Is there any difference?"

Delia almost relented then, but all the bitterness had not yet departed and her eyes were cruel despite the twinkle in them as she replied gravely—

"Either will do, unless they are gold tipped. Got a light?"

"Y-yes," said Miss Amelia, recalling far-off days when she made soap blubbles and blowing diffidently through the odious thing in a like fashion. Then she coughed, and cried, choking: "The window! The window!"

"You're ill!" exclaimed Delia, snatching away the cigarette. "Oh, I didn't mean to make you ill. But you haven't had time yet, surely." And she flung up the window.

"No, no," said Miss Amelia, faintly smiling back. "I didn't mean open the window. I meant pull down the blind. Mrs. Delamere is passing."

"She can't see through me," said Delia, moved to reassure in spite of everything. "I am between you and the window, you know."

Miss Amelia dabbed a small lawn handkerchief upon her brow.

"Mrs. Delamere is so particular. She objects to nearly everything. A breath—and you are done for with Mrs. Delamere."

Delia stood looking down at Miss Amelia, and a certain hardness and cruelty which was not a part of her nature but a deposit life had laid on it, showed in her expression. At last she said slowly—

"Then none of the Delamere army have ever erred? No scandal has ever touched them?"

"There may have been something—very long ago," said Miss Amelia nervously. "But Lord Southwater and Mrs. Delamere never mention it, of course, and we do not either. Everybody has relations whom they wish to forget," added the little lady simply.

"But what if Richard Delamere came back?" said Delia, a perverse whim seizing her to break this ring of silence that surrounded the dead man. "What would they do then?"

Miss Amelia gazed up at Delia, startled by something she could not understand.

"I—I don't know," she said helplessly. "I fear they would find it very inconvenient."

"Inconvenient!" said Delia, and for a moment she stood staring before her, still with that odd inward gaze: then she turned to Miss Amelia and said in a different tone—

"Well, I don't think they need be afraid of ever hearing his name again. That's over."

"What is? You speak as if you had known him, Miss Lambert," said Miss Amelia.

"Do I? Oh, that is just your fancy," said Delia; then

she added abruptly, "Well, what is it you want? Or have we talked things over enough already?"

"I want . . ." said Miss Amelia. "Oh, dear, it sounds so unpleasant."

"Don't say it then," responded Delia.

"Oh, but I must. It is what I came for," said Miss Amelia. "I—I want you to go away from Wendlebury at once and never come back any more."

"Like poor Delamere."

"I really don't know why you will persist in dragging him in," said Miss Amelia agitatedly, beginning to weep a little. "I'm sure I hate being unkind."

"But you think that if I leave everything will go right?" said Delia. "Mr. Unwin will return to your Pauline and all will be happy ever after?"

"I hope so," faltered Miss Amelia. "And I am sure you would prefer a large town where you could do as you like and no one say anything. I am sure you would be sorry to get Mr. Unwin talked about in return for all his kindness."

"Then you think my friendship is injuring Mr. Unwin?" said Delia. "Well, he leaves Wendlebury in a fortnight himself, so that cannot matter much now."

Miss Amelia moved crestfallen towards the door, murmuring as she went—

"I'm told . . . in love affairs . . . a great deal may happen in a brief space of time."

Again Delia smiled, but on this occasion the odd expression—the something between cruelty and mischief—which had made her flattish nose and high cheek-bones and long eyes singularly resemble a cat tormenting a mouse, now gave place to her old look of careless good-nature.

"Let us part friends, won't you?" she said, holding out her hand. "You know we liked each other when you came to have your fortune told, did we not?"

Miss Amelia took the hand held out, though with some reluctance.

"I am aware that this has been an unwarrantable intrusion, Miss Lambert," she said sadly. "But when you care for people you do things . . . perhaps you may not understand. . . ."

"I think I understand. Good-bye, Miss Amelia," said Miss Lambert very gently.

And in that moment the good in Delia answered the good in Miss Amelia very plainly, just as it had done during their first interview. One of those unspoken conversations in which what people *are* does all the talking, began beautifully and might have led—as such often do—to beautiful things happening; when Miss Amelia broke out into articulate words, saying very distinctly—

"Then you will kindly tell Miss Walker to put another width in my green skirt."

"Green skirt!" echoed Delia.

And she saw Mrs. Delamere just across the street, flashing every tooth in her head at the Rural Dean.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TENNIS CLUB

EVA, opening the front door for Pauline, peered up at the blue sky flecked with clouds and remarked: "I hope it'll hold up. It has rained once this morning," thus bearing unconscious witness to the fact that it must rain every day in Wendlebury. "You want fine weather this afternoon, for they say that Mr. Unwin——"

"I really wish——" began Pauline.

"Oh, well!" said Eva, accepting the rebuke before it came. "You'll never make me keep my mouth shut. Us Martins was always newsy. Still, there's fors and againsts. The world's a bad enough place as it is, Miss Pauline, but just you think of the awful things people would do that they don't, if only they weren't so frightened of being talked about."

Pauline descended the steps without pursuing the subject further, and walked rather slowly down the street. The sheer white linen of her tennis dress seemed to rob her of that elusive charm which her grey gowns served to heighten. Miss Amelia, watching her go by, was not far wrong in saying that Pauline looked "somehow quenched."

"Somehow quenched!" retorted Miss Harriet from her sofa. "My dear Amelia, one would never imagine from your mode of speech that our father had allowed us a liberal education. A daughter of William Pritchard should speak refined English as instinctively as she uses her pocket-handkerchief."

Miss Amelia, always responsive to suggestion, felt her

nose-end tickle and blew her nose, saying rather sharply—

"It seems a little hard that you should always go on reminding me that you won the Grammar Prize at school, and I did not, Harriet. I should have thought you might let it drop after all these years."

Then each knitted in silence, or rather Miss Amelia fidgeted in her chair by the window and clicked an intermittent stitch or two, keeping one eye ever on the pavement outside, until Miss Harriet remarked with justifiable annoyance—

"Really, Amelia, if you have contracted a denizen of the poultry yard, you would do well to retire and remove it at once. Your restlessness is unbearable."

"I'm sorry," said Miss Amelia. "I am only watching for Mr. Unwin. I wish to speak to him as he passes and he is sure to go to the tennis club this afternoon."

"What do you want with him?" said Miss Harriet.

"Oh, just to say good-bye," murmured Miss Amelia, turning pink from forehead to chin. "I may not see him again. Oh! here he is!" And as she hurried from the room Miss Harriet called after her—

"You may give him my best wishes. He was exceedingly obliging about that ridiculous jackdaw."

But Miss Amelia had already reached the pavement outside. Her grey hair, which had been so long light mixed with grey, and then grey mixed with light, that this sign of age had crept unawares upon her, was blowing rather untidily in the breeze.

"Oh, Mr. Unwin!" she said in a low, hurried voice, looking up and down the street like a white mouse turned conspirator. "The jewels. . . . Here is the money . . . gold, lest the notes be traced."

"Jewels!" said Unwin stupidly. Then he remembered and clapped his hand to his pocket. "Bless my soul, yes!" he exclaimed. "I have the pawn tickets here. I meant to go round for them at lunch-time to-day."

"Could you——" Miss Amelia paused. "Do you

think you *could* add to all your great kindness by bringing them to our back door after dark? Our new maid will be having her night out then."

"All right," said Unwin, and he smiled very kindly down upon the little lady.

"You're sure you don't mind?" said Miss Amelia anxiously. "And please do not think it odd if you hear me calling you the butter. It comes very late on a Friday evening, and my sister Harriet will perhaps require some explanation of your knock. Oh, I do dislike such untruthfulness, but when you once begin——" And such was the wistful seriousness of Miss Amelia's glance that Unwin felt constrained to reply with equal seriousness: "You did it for the best."

Then they said farewell and he pursued his way to the tennis club, where he managed, as usual, to convey the impression that he rode on the crest of the wave. He was helped in this by his natural buoyancy of step, bright eyes and cleanness of outline, but intention was there too. The quality in his temperament, vanity or pluck or whatever it might be, which made him so hate to be pitied, was at this moment in danger of swamping every other consideration. All his bright mind and will ministered to it so willingly that he was not in the least conscious of playing a part as he greeted the group of people standing near the summer house.

It was already late in the afternoon and the sun seemed to have gained colour from slanting all day across cornfields nearly ripe for harvest. The clear, cool golden light, quite different from southern sunshine, and the vivid green of the grass, and the red and white of the pleasant English faces, made a picture that Unwin was to keep always in that strange gallery of the mind where no one can by effort fill a single space. Pauline stood in the shadow of a tree; the crudeness of her white gown had changed to every lovely tone of dappled grey and gold. She was hatless, and her hair stood out sombrely

round her delicate, pointed features. Her elusive charm had returned now, and her absolute stillness as she stood there throbbing with life and passion and vitality vaguely impressed Unwin. He felt forced to look at her, and then glanced away, and then looked again; so long as she remained silent, she was his. But when Mary Carter made some laughing remark to her, which she answered, the spell began to lose power. Then the Vicar blew a blast upon his nose, and Unwin's magic castle which had sprung up so wonderfully in an instant fell down flat, not even a trace of it was left.

"Our Vice-President!" announced the Vicar's wife, apparently making the blast useful to trumpet Mrs. Delamere's approach.

"Not often we see Mrs. Delamere here," said Unwin.

"There's my father!" said Mary Carter. "You see him at a tennis club more seldom still."

"Better have it at once," murmured young Carter, wearing the air of a Cabinet Minister at least.

"This sort of thing wants to appear easy and natural; nothing stiff," murmured a lean man from the bank; then he added, loudly: "Mr. Vicar, I think you promised——"

"Ahem!" coughed the Vicar at once, not because his throat was sore, but because in his callow curate-hood he had been wont so to reassure himself, and it had grown into a habit. "I am sure, my dear friends, you have not come here to hear me talk. Plenty of that at other times, eh?" And he paused for the tinkle of laughter which obediently followed. "We are here to wish our young friend good luck, and I am sure I voice the sentiments of all present when I say that he will be greatly missed in this tennis club. The welfare of the town itself is not a matter to enlarge upon on such an occasion as the present, still Mr. Unwin's connection with architecture brings one naturally in touch with the great question of

the town water supply, and I will just ask you to bear with me for a few moments while I——"

But here somebody sacrificed two cups and a saucer, the property of the club, to the general success of the occasion, it being a known fact that when the Vicar asked the Wendlebury folk to bear with him for a few moment nothing less than an earthquake would stop him short of half an hour, and the waiting Mrs. Delamere already began to wear a pained, perfunctory smile. The crash was followed by exclamations and surmises as to how it could possibly have happened, and young Carter hastened to say—

"We will now call upon our Vice-President to perform the office which she has so graciously undertaken to perform."

Mrs. Delamere stepped forward, flashed her teeth brilliantly on every one, even including Pauline, and said in the high, made-up voice used by many ladies in public speaking—

"I am sure it is a very great pleasure to me to be present this afternoon. Mr. Unwin is going to a land where young men are needed, and no doubt he will—will—will——" Here Mrs. Delamere endeavoured to consult a card concealed in her glove, but being unable to abstract it, she continued extempore: "will do better than he has done here. I mean a hot climate more suited —that is——" She regained both head and card together. "I have great pleasure in handing this cigarette case to Mr. Unwin, and I trust that as he inhales the fragrant weed amid palms and prosperity he will often remember the Wendlebury Tennis Club."

"Hear! Hear!" said every one.

"Very neat!" said the lean man from the bank.

"It's awfully good of you—awfully," said Unwin, bearing with some embarrassment a situation in which few people shine. "I don't know how to thank you, but I shall think about you all often enough, no fear."

And, indeed, his gay assumption of regretting nothing he left behind, which had almost deceived even himself, seemed in danger of failing as he looked round at these people whom he had known more or less all his life, and saw how much real kindness and friendliness they felt for him. Yet both to him and them it was evident that he was going away under a cloud, though they did their best to make it seem as if the cloud were not there. Even the attitude of Mrs. Delamere meant nothing, really, because she would present anything or open anything if approached as the chief lady of Wendlebury, lest some one else should usurp her place.

He did not look at Pauline's face, but he saw her fingers closing tightly over her tennis racket with that delicate sureness of touch which was so characteristic of her. Suddenly, for no reason at all as it seemed, he wanted violently to unclasp them and kiss them until his lips were bruised with the pressure. Then he heard Mary Carter's sensible, cheery voice saying—

"What about another sett before the light all goes?"

Thus was the little function brought to a natural close, and Unwin realised what a nice girl Mary was, and vowed to send her beads or grasses or whatever can be sent with discretion from West Africa to a young lady with whom one has never had any sentimental relations.

The group immediately broke up, and as the young people walked across the grass the light was already dim in the far corner of the field under the beech trees. Pauline walked away, hesitated until Unwin was momentarily alone, and then went up to him.

"May I see the cigarette case again?" she asked abruptly.

"Of course," he said in a formal tone, taking it from his pocket. "Such a good design, isn't it?"

"Very."

"So kind of every one," added Unwin, not knowing

exactly what he did say, because Pauline bent so close to him, peering at the case in his hand.

"You really are going next week?" she said, touching the engraved inscription.

"Yes," said Unwin. "Didn't you know?"

"I heard so. I supposed so."

The others passed on out of hearing and they were now quite alone. A great many unspoken questions vibrated between them. At last Pauline said in a low voice, without looking at him—

"I want to speak to you. Will you come with me under the beech trees?"

"Yes." He hesitated. "Yes, if you really want me to."

She nodded and they went on a little way without speaking, both instinctively anxious to put a greater distance between themselves and the others before saying any more.

"You'll wonder——" murmured Pauline, flitting grey in her white gown like a spirit of the mist under the deep trees.

"Not at all," said Unwin stiffly. What game was she playing with him now? Did she want to whistle him back just at the last? No fear! He was not having any.

She stopped in the deepest shadow and waited for him to come up; her eyes burnt bright, even in that green darkness.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "I can't let you go without telling you. You shall not go away disheartened, thinking it is something in *you* that lost you the post. You are as capable and certain of success as ever. It's only . . ." She broke off, trembling.

He pushed his head forward, staring into her face.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll hear," she said breathlessly. "I'm not going to think, and I'm not going to care. You may even tell

s Lambert what I've said if you like. I
n . . . ."

"Pauline!" he shouted, so that those beyond looked round. "You've never been jealous of Delia Lambert? What an ass I was not to think of that! But I somehow never thought you could be jealous of a chap like me. You seemed so above it all."

"Hush! They'll hear you," said Pauline.

"Let 'em!" he said. "If you make any fuss I shall take you in my arms and kiss you before the whole lot. They can see if they like. I don't care. Oh! Pauline—you don't know how a man feels—I've waited so long—— My darling! My darling!"

He drew her almost roughly into the deeper shadow of a narrow place between a giant beech and the hedge and, unclasping the supple fingers which were about the tennis racket, he kissed them as he had wished to do. At first she held herself away from him, but soon the strength of his young passion so kindled hers that she could only lie silent on his breast and let him kiss her as he would. Nothing seemed real any more, but his touch and the feel of his coat on her cheek and his lips on hers.

"So this was what you really had to tell me, eh, Pauline?" he whispered at last.

She started as if a cold hand had been laid on her heart, then she felt the pressure of his arms and was reassured; nothing could endanger their love now; she would still tell him because she so wanted him to go on being so splendidly sure of himself and because it was certain that she could never be happy, married to him, with a secret such as this between them which might come out at any time. They would share this injury which she had done his career as they were to share everything else in life.

Feeling thus, she made sure that Unwin would feel the same, and it was with deep contrition, but no real fear, that she answered finally—

"No. I was going to say something quite different . . . Maurice . . ." But here their rapture in hearing her call him by his name for the first time stopped all further conversation for awhile, until she released herself and pushed back her heavy chair. "Wait, dear, I can't talk when you hold me so," she said, with that little husky note in her sweet voice which he had always loved. Then as he came towards her once more she said breathlessly, feeling instinctively that she would never have the courage again: "Maurice, it was I who lost you the post."

"You!" he said, then he tossed the ridiculous idea from him as one may a feather. "I don't believe it!"

"It is true," she said; and she began to feel afraid.

"How could you possibly influence Lord Southwater?"

He smiled, putting his arm about her again and murmuring in her ear: "Conceited little goose . . . thinks she can rule the world."

But Pauline was not going to lose her chance; their life together should not be spoiled by the banal complication of an untold secret. "I saw you outside the Dragon at Ryeford that morning Johnson died. You stood there leaning against the doorway in your evening clothes. I thought . . ." And then it was she who flung out her arms and pressed him to her. "I thought you were drunk. I told Aunt Dickson so, Maurice."

"You thought I was drunk? You believed me to be a drunkard?" he said stupidly, staring at her.

"Yes." The word fell heavily to Pauline's own ear, like a stone falling down into depths hitherto unguessed.

"When you laughed and talked and went out with me, you really believed I was a drunkard."

"Not always," faltered Pauline. "Only—only now and then by a sort of accident. It was before I loved you. Oh, it seems incredible to me now that I ever could have thought such a thing, much less have repeated it! But I have suffered as well as you. I can't tell you how I

have suffered." She paused, weeping. "Can you ever forgive me?"

There followed a silence, and then he said in a toneless voice—

"Oh, yes; I forgive you all right."

"But you don't love me any more?" she said, her desperate eyes searching his face, her fingers twining round his unresponsive hand. Then she let his hand drop. "Maurice! Maurice! It can't be that you won't love me any more?"

He looked away from her at the distant tennis groups.

"I can't help it," he said heavily. "You were just a make-up of my own imagination. The girl I thought you were would have been too loyal and straight. . . . I thought you were above all other girls."

"It's not my fault you thought that," cried Pauline, almost beside herself with this reaction from the intense happiness of a few minutes ago. "I'm only like all the rest, excepting in one thing. . . . I love you more than any one else could."

"And yet you told this tale all round Wendlebury?"

"No. No. I only told it to Aunt Dickson. She mentioned it in confidence—meaning only kindly by you—to Miss Argle, who no doubt repeated it to Mrs. Delamere. I have never heard any mention of it in Wendlebury."

"Then you don't know for certain that Mrs. Delamere told Lord Southwater?"

There was a pause. A last couple of players still tossed up the balls in the evening twilight. Forty! Love!

"I do know," said Pauline. "I asked Lord Southwater myself."

"You went cap in hand for me, begging the job after he had turned me down!" exclaimed Unwin. "Well . . . that's the limit."

"I was so sorry. It was all my fault. I wanted to put things right," said Pauline humbly.

"Had he heard the story?"

"Yes."

"But he is a just man. Surely he did not make up his mind without further inquiries?" said Unwin.

"No, but . . ." She paused, then held up her head and looked him straight in the face. "I will tell the truth. It was the story that first put any doubt into his mind. So he began to make inquiries in Wendlebury."

"What could Wendlebury say about me?" demanded Unwin.

"Oh, it's not what Wendlebury can, but what Wendlebury will!" cried Pauline. "You must know that by now. And every one thinks you irresponsible because you are full of fun and never consider what people will say."

"I see," said Unwin, moving a step or two towards the tennis players. "Almost too late to play, isn't it?"

Pauline felt herself dismissed into a world of outer darkness. Any passion of reproach would have been less hopeless than those few simple words. She walked silently by him while a pigeon wheeled across the sky with golden light on its wings. "Love all!" the tennis players called.

It was to Pauline as if she heard the final clang of Eden's gates. Desperately, she caught Unwin's hand in hers and pressed it.

"Maurice! I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it! I would have died sooner than lose you your job."

His hand remained heavily unresponsive in hers. "All right. Don't you worry! If Southwater is so easily put off as all that I would rather not work with him."

"Then this is the end?" said Pauline.

"Oh!" he paused, and the voices of the tennis players filled in the silence. "I think I'll just . . . a last sett. . . ."

He walked away from her and she was alone. The breeze had fallen; every leaf stood still above her head.

There was something strange and terrible to
t golden stillness with the light voices of the
ling out the name of love. She was vaguely
, in a mist of agony, to the knowledge that a
may forgive an injury to his love but seldom to his
e.

And Unwin, struck deep in his weakest point, was at that moment conscious of nothing else save his own pain. He was like a bull blinded by its own blood as he crossed the field and climbed over the fence into the road to avoid the players at the gate. It was an exit often used by him, and he plunged across the road with his head down, looking neither right nor left.

Almost immediately there was a shout, a grinding sound of brakes and clutches, and Unwin lay on the dusty ground, unconscious, with two middle-aged motorists bending over him.

"Only stunned, I think," said the man, who was no other than the father of that youthful Argle of Argle Towers so concerned about his dress clothes. "His heart is all right and there seem to be no bones broken."

"But what on earth are we to do with him?" said Mrs. Argle, gazing aimlessly round at the deserted road. "We can't leave him here, you know."

Mr. Argle agreed, for though one of those keen motorists to whom pedestrians on a road are but as slugs on a cabbage to a gardener, he yet possessed human feelings.

"We had better put him in the car and take him home," suggested Mrs. Argle.

"Grand idea!" said Mr. Argle, then his face clouded. "We don't know where his home is."

"Look in his pockets!"

"Good! Oh, a pawn ticket. Doesn't look like a chap who would be driven to that, but you never know. No card? No letters? Oh, here is a cigarette case with an inscription. Unwin! Why, bless my soul, I ought to

have recognised him at once. He's that architect chap who was to have gone to Southwater. Here . . . you lift his feet and I'll . . ."

Then Unwin opened his eyes, put a dazed hand across his brow and said faintly—

"What . . . what are you doing?"

"I'm awfully sorry, my dear chap. We knocked you down. You popped over the fence suddenly and it was all done in a minute," said Mr. Argle. "Can you stand?"

"I—think so," said Unwin, in a mazed fashion, still scarcely knowing where he was.

"Then pop into the car and we'll have you home in no time," said Argle.

"We are so sorry," added Mrs. Argle casually, handing him his hat.

The car went on again, full speed ahead—the Argles being already late for dinner with their relative, Miss Argle, whom they visited as a family duty at very rare intervals—and the cool rushing air soon revived Unwin. His youth and strength enabled him to shake off the outward effects of the accident far more quickly than seemed possible when he was lying prone in the dust a few minutes earlier, and he insisted on being put down at the corner of the market place, though his legs trembled as he began to walk on after bidding the Argles farewell. The houses round seemed at first a little unsteady, as if a queer, silent earthquake were taking place in Wendlebury, but he jammed his hat on his head and forced himself to walk jauntily across the market square, giving suitable greetings and replies to two or three people whom he encountered.

"Yes. Knocked down by a car! Nasty knock, but all right now. Lovely night!" And so on, until he gained the safe guidance of the street beyond. His own concern, instinctively, was to hide the wound Pauline had given him. He *would* still seem to have all he wanted; none should

think for a moment that he was there, cap in hand, asking anything of any one in the world, even of fate.

He was obliged, however, to stand still for a moment or two to steady himself, and his glance fell on three golden balls opposite. What were they playing at? Why could they not keep quiet? Butter . . . butter. . . . What had they to do with butter? Then his groping mind caught it. Miss Amelia! Poor old girl, he must not forget her. She would be hanging out of that back door and getting a cold. He laughed feebly, still a little dizzy and light-headed, and went into the pawnshop.

He must have been walking about aimlessly after that for some time with the jewelry box under his arm, for it was quite dark when he stood outside Miss Amelia's door and knocked gently. It was opened at once, and she peered out, blinking over a candle which guttered in the draught.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Most unfortunate. He has been early for once. The butter, I mean. If you really *would* forgive me . . ." Aloud she continued in an artificial shaky falsetto: "No muffins to-day, thank you!"

From above came a commanding voice—

"Muffins! At this time of night! The man must think we're mad. Tell him so!"

Poor Miss Amelia, pressing her heart with her left hand while she took the jewelry box with her right, endeavoured thus to convey her sense of eternal gratitude while she echoed forlornly—

"Muffins . . . at this time of night . . . you must be mad!"

"Shut that door at once. There is a draught," called Miss Harriet.

"Good-night," whispered Miss Amelia, "and God bless you!"

Then Unwin was out in the streets again, unable to go home though he felt tired, needing food, but sickened by the thought of it. He was conscious of a loneliness like that of a stray dog, and yet he rejected with distaste

the idea of visiting any friend in Wendlebury. They were all so kind, but he wanted something different from their cheerful talk and brightly lighted rooms. He wanted . . .

Quite suddenly he realised that Delia would do.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM

UNWIN sat in the large chair by the empty fire-grate smoking a cigarette. He had told Delia about the motor accident, but she knew quite well that there was something more behind this which he had not told her, and which accounted for the beaten look on his face as he sat there in the shadow of the mantelpiece.

She answered lightly, however, and after a while went out of the room, remaining away some minutes. There was a faint chink of crockery in the kitchen, the sound of a popping cork; but it all came vaguely to Unwin, like things heard in a miserable dream. He rose from his seat . . . time to go on again. His urging restlessness would not let him remain here any longer.

Delia heard his footsteps and called out to him casually—

"Here! Will you carry my supper-tray in before you go? Miss Walker is out and it is rather heavy."

He frowned impatiently and went to the kitchen. Of course he must help her before he went. There was something so deeply engrained in him, obliging him to help all women, that it was instinctive and held even in this dark hour. But he muttered under his breath: "Damn the supper!"

Delia gave him the tray and he carried it back into the room. It contained fresh butter, crusty bread and sardines in tomato. He began to feel a slight desire for food.

"Well, I must go home now," he said dully.

"All right. Have a drink first, though. You must be thirsty."

And he realised all at once that his tongue and throat were very dry.

"I was going to give myself a treat," she continued with a little laugh. "Strawberry punch. Miss Walker gave me a few late strawberries. You know how it is made."

She picked them as she spoke, putting them into a jug where she crushed them up with a spoonful of powdered sugar, speaking lightly all the time, as much to herself as to him, and he found it soothing to watch her. "Now the liquid." She poured from another jug which was on the tray. "Now a dash of soda-water. If only I had some ice . . . the strawberries ought to have stood an hour or two . . . it won't be so bad. . . ." She poured a glassful carefully, leaving the strawberries at the bottom of the jug. "Taste it!"

He took the glass eagerly, realising at last a raging thirst, and the cool, fruit-flavoured liquid slipped down his hot throat with a most delicious freshness. It was all gone before he drew breath.

"I say, I wanted that drink," he said, putting down the glass. "What is there in it? I never tasted anything so good."

"Oh, only strawberries and soda-water and a half-pint bottle of champagne I had left over from my party. Don't you remember? The one I had to celebrate my legacy?"

She was now cutting bread and spreading butter as she spoke, seeming to pay no attention to Unwin, who sat down again by the mantelpiece.

"Good butter you get in Wendlebury . . . whatever else . . . and real home-made bread. I'm going to have a sardine sandwich, will you?" She held out the plate. "Strawberry punch is rather indigestible without eating. Help yourself."

Unwin took a sandwich and began to eat unwillingly; it tasted good. He stretched out his hand and took another from the plate which Delia had left on the corner of the table near his seat. She poured more strawberry punch for him, and he did not notice that she only drank plain soda-water herself. He was still unhappy, but the world seemed a less drearily, uncomfortable place. He was very abstemious and the little bottle of champagne which had truly seemed nothing to Delia, accustomed to men of different habits, was sufficient, in his state of mind and on an empty stomach, to make him see facts with a sort of emotional unreality. He was not in the very least intoxicated—he was not even excited—but the wine had loosened his tongue, and he undoubtedly thought and felt and spoke differently from what he would have done had he taken cold water. The fact that Delia never thought this possible after a couple of tumblers of champagne and soda-water mixed with strawberry juice, gave his words all the weight of sober judgment.

"Have one of my cigarettes; they are better than yours," said Delia, smiling. "Beggars always smoke good tobacco. You would be ashamed to see the state of my stockings."

He looked idly at the slim feet where a white patch undoubtedly could be seen above each shoe-heel, and inhaled the smoke of the excellent cigarette.

"You're a good pal, Delia!"

"That's right," she said, and her voice was devoid of any question.

So he felt impelled to continue: "I was feeling beastly when I came in here."

"Glad you came, then . . . if you feel any better now," she answered.

"I do." He paused. "I'd had a nasty knock."

"It is horrid . . . saying good-bye. I suppose the 'fare-thee-well-and-if-for-ever' note was very strong at the tennis club this evening?"

He looked down, kicking the fender.

"It was not that. I'm not the sort to make a howl about turning out into the world, I hope. I'm rather glad to have the chance, in fact, for the one drawback to Southwater's post was that I should be in a very narrow sphere."

"All work worth doing has to be done in a narrow sphere if it goes on long enough. Concentration automatically makes the sphere narrow," said Delia, still impersonal.

"No; it was not that," said Unwin, pursuing his own train of thought undistracted by her remark. "Do you think it possible for a person to care for another person and then go round talking injurious scandal about that person?"

Delia stared at him in genuine surprise.

"So you're letting *that* worry you! Wendlebury gossip!"

Then Unwin saw that he had been on the verge of telling Delia what he never meant to tell any living soul, and he gathered his discretion together with both hands in a sort of panic.

"Rather idiotic, isn't it?" he said, flushing with a sense of danger only just escaped.

"I dare say the accident with the car has shaken you up more than you think," said Delia.

"Yes, yes, that's it, no doubt," he said, thankfully accepting her explanation, for he was comfortable now and did not want to leave the chair and Delia's companionship, which seemed to hedge him round with such a pleasant sense of repose.

"You'll like the sea-voyage," said Delia, after they had remained smoking quietly for some minutes.

"Yes. I wish you were coming too!"

Then—for some quite unexplicable reason—Unwin's glance, which had been careless, became focussed on

Delia's face. It remained there until she felt the colour rising to her forehead.

"Oh! I've had plenty of sea-voyages," she said at last, thrusting aside, as it were, the evidence of those suddenly flaming cheeks.

Unwin sat looking at her until the red faded from those high cheek-bones, but it was evident he had ceased to see her; he was entirely engrossed by some discovery within himself.

"I say, Delia," he broke out, ending the silence; "I didn't know I meant it, but I do. I wish you *were* coming with me!"

She looked straight at him, flushing again, but speaking quite clearly.

"What as? Governess? But I'm afraid I am hardly old enough and you are a little too old."

Now it is a fact that Unwin had simply thought of her as the most delightful comrade in the world, and no details of their wandering out from Wendlebury had presented themselves to his mind, these being blurred in a sort of pleasant mist which caused the desirable thing to seem possible. But her question made him reply, with a sense of diving suddenly off a high pier into deep water—

"There's only one way a man can take a woman, is there, if he has any decency about him?"

"You mean as nurse?" parried Delia, a little breathlessly all the same. "But that means your wearing a splint or something of that sort all the time."

"You know what I mean," said Unwin. "You are the best pal I have in the world. I won't leave you behind if you care to come?"

Delia shook her head.

"Dear old boy, I'm afraid it wouldn't work."

Her opposition stiffened his new-made resolve, and he remembered how the red flush grew and faded under her eyes. If she cared for him, she could have him. She was the best sort he had ever seen, and he would like to have

her with him in a strange country. As for love . . . Well, he had had enough of love to last him his lifetime.

"Delia," he said, reaching forward and taking her hand, "will you come with me as my wife?"

She shook her head, leaving her hand in his.

"No," she said, "you don't love me, Maurice, and I don't love you; not in that way. I—I believe I'm a bit in love with you now. You are so young and full of life and go. I don't say I shouldn't enjoy being made love to by you. You see, I'm not a child. . . . I'm a woman who has loved. So I don't deceive myself; and I won't deceive you—for—for a mess of pottage."

"You are not doing so," he said. "I am not in love with you either." But even as he said it, a little gust of passion swept over him and he pressed the hand he held. "Only . . . I do want you to go with me, Delia."

At the real feeling in his tone, evanescent though it was, Delia's expression changed. She gazed questioningly into his face.

"I don't understand you. I thought——" she paused. "You may resent it or not as you like; I thought you were in love with Pauline Westcott?"

"Too much of a gossip for my taste, thank you."

"Then you blame her!" exclaimed Delia: but went on immediately: "No; you're wrong then. She would never go round the place scandal-mongering. The thing's incredible!"

"It's true."

"Who told you? Some old maid or other . . ."

"She did."

"She did, herself?"

"Yes," said Unwin. Then a sudden shame came over him. He could not think what had made him tell Delia. "She meant no harm," he said awkwardly. "I am quite sure she meant no harm."

Delia looked at him. If he still really loved Pauline,

he could not have betrayed her in such a way. That made a great difference.

"I don't know what to do," she said slowly.

"Come," he answered. "We'll have great fun together, Delia."

She smiled at him, her odd smile which was yet charming.

"Follow the fun? Eh, Maurice?" she said. "But there must be times in between—and—and at the end of the fun: when I'm old and don't care for fun any longer. Have you thought of those?"

"I shall be old too," he said. "We'll have gout together—but not in Wendlebury."

"That's just it!" She pounced upon the idea brought forth in those words. "You feel now that you want to get away from Wendlebury and all connected with it for ever."

"Well—and if I do?" For even as she spoke he was conscious of a desire to put an irrevocable barrier between himself and Pauline. The side of his nature which made him so resent being miserable now spurred him on to end the suspense and worry of the past weeks once and for all. That weaker part of him urged insistently: "Pauline has made you unhappy. Let there be no more Pauline!"

"How can we be sure that you will continue to feel about things as you do now?" continued Delia, arguing with herself as well as with him. Then she flung out at him, almost despite her own will: "Oh, it won't do! It won't do!"

He rose.

"All right. If you don't want me, leave me. I shall get on somehow."

She laughed unexpectedly.

"You tiresome boy! That's just the worst of it. I *do* want you!"

He laughed too. There was something refreshing to his jaded spirit in her light change of mood.

"Take me then, old girl," he said. "We'll make a glorious trip of it, and if you can't stick the climate you shall come home. Let's be thankful we can be jolly. I believe lots of people can't."

She stood drumming with her fingers upon the table, glancing aside at Unwin out of her long-shaped eyes with a gleam of malicious amusement. So they stood—on either side of the table—and arranged for an elopement. And yet had he wooed her after the same fashion as he had wooed Pauline that afternoon between the beech-trees, she would have refused him. She knew well the value of a great love and was too generous to have offered a small price in return for that treasure.

But she was greatly tempted to do as he asked her. The quiet time at Wendlebury had restored her spent forces and she was again ready for the road—the true wanderer. And to have Unwin for her travelling comrade seemed a very delightful prospect. They two could have such a jolly time of it, while it lasted. . . .

While it lasted.

She drummed on the table with her fingers.

"Come along, Delia," he said, smiling.

She looked at him again. He had never seemed so handsome to her thinking as now when he stood with his young, lithe figure leaning on the table-edge. His light-brown hair was a little disordered and his eyes shone with a certain reckless gaiety which she found irresistible. So be it; she would come out and play and chance the future whipping!

"Very well, Maurice," she said.

Then he walked round the table and put his arm lightly about her waist.

"Good girl! We'll have lots of fun together. Can you be ready by Wednesday?"

"At the Registrar's? It will have to be done here."

"Oh, I didn't mean the wedding. I sail on Wednesday. I—I forgot the wedding."

There was a second's pause, then they both laughed together. Unwin held her closer.

"By Jove, you are a brick, Delia! Any other girl . . ." He paused and kissed her. "We must be married on Monday, of course."

"What will Wendlebury say?"

"Nothing that Wendlebury can say will matter to either of us any more," he answered. "Hey, for the open road! I'm breathing deeper already, Delia."

She pondered again, though clasped in his arm. Perhaps it was all for the best; perhaps he did need the open road to bring out all he was capable of becoming. She gave a deep sigh and cast all care to the winds.

"All right, then," she said. "The open road be it. But—but—I'll come with you as a pal, you know, Maurice. I was only joking about the wedding."

"Were you?" said Unwin. "Then I was not. I wouldn't let any woman ruin her reputation for my pleasure, much less one like you, Delia. You understand that?"

"I do," said Delia. "That's why . . ." Then she broke off. "Think; before it is too late! Take a night to think it over!"

"I won't take a minute to think it over. Do you want to come with me or not?"

"You know I do," she answered. "But——"

He stood back, laughing at her.

"But! We're off to a life where there are no buts, Delia."

She saw him, erect, virile, and gave in at last to a jolly sense of joining those who play as they go along the road of life, catching butterflies, lingering, eating to the full at a hedge of blackberries. It would be such fun to go off on the wander again with a comrade like Unwin.

Then they heard Miss Walker's key rattling in the door and Delia said quickly—

"You must be off now. Poor Miss Walker, she has been

so good to me: I won't worry her just at the last. You must come to-morrow morning and we will arrange everything."

"I'm just going, Miss Walker," said Unwin, taking up his hat.

"Oh!" said Miss Walker, but her tone implied, "Not before time." Then she noticed the look of excitement and fatigue on his face and her old kindness for him came back. "It's not that I want to turn you out, Mr. Unwin. But it is a little late . . . two ladies living alone . . ."

"Of course. Good-night! Good-night!" and Unwin found himself in the long, dark street near the Bowling Green Inn, where a few yellow gas-lamps twinkled beneath a moonlit sky.

The air blew cool from the green fields round Wendlebury and his head cleared as he walked along. In crossing the market place he again saw the three balls of the pawnbroker catching the moonlight. He stood quite still with his hand to his forehead. Could it be possible that he had asked a woman to marry him who was not Pauline, and thus altered the whole course of his life since seeing those golden balls last? The thing began to seem incredible, though he did not regret it.

He was not the first man by any means who has come out from a heated room into a cool street, to wonder what miracle can have happened to him in there, to make him take a course of action affecting his whole life which he had never contemplated. Nor will he be the last. But for the individual man such is always an uniquely strange moment. The stays and anchors seem all to be rooted up. He feels himself—just for that breathing space—an atom rushed along by the current.

But the thing is done, and if he be a man such as Unwin, he immediately and instinctively begins to make the best of it. He is in honour bound to a woman, and at the decent core of him stirs a desire to think that he has

pursued, captured and gained his desire. His chivalry casts a cloak over the woman he is going to make his wife.

So Unwin, muttering rather dizzily to himself: "She's a good sort . . . a real, good sort," went on again to his lodgings. Once there, he sat down in his armchair and immediately fell asleep. Hour after hour passed and he still remained in the dead sleep of mental and physical exhaustion. At last dawn came, and he awoke to the day, the promised husband of Delia Lambert.

Delia spoke to Miss Walker, helped to remove the supper tray and went upstairs to her bedroom. But she had no inclination for sleep. She sat on the edge of her bed staring into the semi-darkness made by the candle—for Miss Walker had no gas upstairs—and she saw during those hours the pageant of her own life go past. Memory cannot hold sensation, so it was only the silent dumb-show of it all that she re-witnessed thus . . . love . . . heart-breaking disillusion . . . fun . . . variety . . . death. . . . She saw them slipping past one after the other between her and the wall-paper.

Then they ceased; so she saw the wall-paper beyond with its green roses, and the rest of the little dingy room. But it had a charm for her, because she had come here beaten—for the first time—and had found a haven of refuge where she could be quiet until she gained strength to go on with life again.

She rose, finding herself stiff with the long sitting in one position, and went to the window where she drew up the blind. So she also saw the dawn, and thought of Unwin. The smell of ripe corn and deep pastures and gardens full of roses and lavender and southernwood made the morning air fragrant as it blew upon her face through the open window. She, too, had undergone a Wendlebury change into something sweeter than she was before she came. All she might have been, but for the fiery tongues of scandal driving her out into the wil-

derness in early girlhood, showed in her face as she stood there watching the sun rise over the clustered roofs of the little town.

She thought of Unwin sleeping and her look grew wonderfully tender. Poor boy! Poor boy! They would have such a jolly time together. Then her brow contracted and her glance turned inward as she remembered that pageant of the night. What had she left to give him in return for his youth and kindness? Faithfulness . . . affection . . . that was all he wanted; that was all he offered her.

But could she count on herself even for that, in the long run? She might get dead sick of it all and be driven to take her own way again, because nothing had ever held her fast but love. She had started to be a vagabond too soon.

The tall spire of the church was now catching the early sunlight. The town lay silent below. A pigeon wheeled against the morning sky.

Delia thought of the grave beneath the shadow of that spire, and her thoughts of the past night became less achingly vivid but more real. They grew simple, fragrant of the good things of life, like the wind blowing in through the window.

She knew that though she had already loved twice, her last love was indeed her last. Some fire of womanhood had died within her when Dick Delamere went, and no power on earth could bring it back. She had only so little to offer in return for Unwin's faithfulness of a lifetime, and she knew that he was of the sort who keeps faith with his wife, whatever the temptation. But how would it be when he fell in love again, as he inevitably would do, and she saw him struggling between his love and his duty to herself?

Well, the fun would be worth the price. She would follow the fun.

But even as she quoted Unwin's words, the thought of

his gaiety and kindness made her waver again. It was not fair to take all that, and give so little in return.

Whatever happened, she had always played fair before. . . . She looked out again, hearing faint sounds on the road. The carts were coming in laden with butter and eggs and flowers for Market Day. The dearness and simplicity of the little town seemed to be held up before her, all daily fresh, like a bunch of country flowers.

A few tears forced themselves through her eyelids and ran down her cheeks. She could not give up the sudden vista of recovered youth and adventure that had opened out before her. It was too hard. No one had any right to expect it.

But she knew now in her heart that she expected it of herself and must do it.

The cart lumbered past, piled high with its sweet load, and the rosy-faced countryman whistled as he went. He sounded so free of care.

It seemed odd to Delia that any one could be so carefree that morning.

Then she glanced at the clock: so late already? And began to empty her untidy drawers into her box.

The early morning light shone also on either side of the bedroom blind which screened the connubial felicity of Mr. and Mrs. Chubb. It illuminated first Mr. Chubb's nose and then Mrs. Chubb's elbow, and finally twinkled upon the closed eyelids of the recumbent cabman.

"Gar-r-rh!" said Mr. Chubb, waking with reluctance. Then he sat up and demanded angrily: "What did you do that for?"

Mrs. Chubb was alert on the instant, leaning on that red elbow.

"I didn't do nothing, Chubb."

"You woke me up. If you hadn't woke me up I shouldn't ha' woke up. I don't wake meself up, do I? Not at this time."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Chubb. "It's somebody knocking. That's what you heard."

"Silly woman! Who's to knock at such an' a time? I telled you it was——" Then he broke off and his face slowly changed. "Somebody is knocking now. But they didn't knock afore, else I should have heard 'em."

"Who can it be?" said Mrs. Chubb. "Oh, I do hope the house next door isn't afire. They're always that careless . . ."

"Get up and see," commanded Chubb.

"Go yourself," retorted Mrs. Chubb—yet had an angel told her six months ago that she could so answer back her lord she would have pronounced the thing to be impossible.

"What!" said Chubb, and he remained a moment silent, the mental blow being so great. "Very well," he said, getting out of bed. "Very well—I'll go!"

But Chubb's "very well," taken with his ready acquiescence, seemed so bodeful to Mrs. Chubb that she jumped out of bed the other side and quavered forth hastily: "I —I'm going, Chubb, of course. It was only my joke."

"Joke!" said Chubb. "You joking! You'll be setting up as a match for Unwin yet—and a bonny pass it'll lead you to, my woman. As it has him. Going out to lions and tigers!"

"I won't go out to lions and tigers!" muttered Mrs. Chubb tearfully, putting on garments. "Though no doubt you'd be pleased to know me all safely gobbled up so that you and her——"

"Bang! Bang!" went the impatient knuckles on the outer door.

"Coming!" shouted Mrs. Chubb.

And the next minute she opened the house door to confront Delia on the door-step.

"You!" she gasped, as if Delia were a thought materialised before her, and nothing out of the comfortable, tangible world. "You!"

"I don't wonder you are surprised," said Delia. "But I want Mr. Chubb as a great favour to get up and bring his cab round at once. I shall just have nice time to catch the first train up to town, where I am obliged to go quite unexpectedly."

"You're going to London?" said Mrs. Chubb, peering into Delia's face, which looked very lined and haggard in the morning light.

"Yes."

"Are you coming back again to Wendlebury?"

Delia hesitated, then she said with decision: "No."

"Not never?"

"No."

Mrs. Chubb turned round from the door and shouted up the stairs: "Come down! Get the cab out. Miss Lambert wants to go to London for ever."

There was a thud that shook the house as Chubb jumped out of bed.

"The early train? All right. Plenty of time," he shouted back.

"Your husband is always so obliging," said Delia, smiling kindly at Mrs. Chubb, though she looked abstracted and anxious. "I knew he would not mind. Good-bye!"

Mrs. Chubb opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again, and said: "Good-bye. I—I hope you'll enjoy London!"

Then she ran upstairs, and was so eager to help her husband in his toilette that he bellowed at last with excusable anger—

"Blast it! Can't you leave a man to button his own braces?" and so drove her from the room.

But she hummed a tune in the kitchen as she boiled the kettle and cut the bread and butter, and the burden of her song was this—

"Folks-that-lives-in-London-town
"Can't-nypnotize-no-more."

She spread her butter to that rhythm, and her face shone so pleasantly joyful over the clean table that even Chubb noticed it.

"Come, owd lass!" he said. "Give us a kiss. There's a many worse."

Mrs. Chubb kissed him with butter on her lips, for she had been tasting, but with tears of joy in her eyes. Her Chubby would soon be all her own again. Already the spell had lifted.

If Chubb could have seen into her mind as he swallowed his tea, he would have thought her mad; and, indeed, the fancies of a jealous woman are no less extravagant and unfounded than the delusions of madness.

CHAPTER XX

FAREWELL!

UNWIN stood before the door of Delia's lodgings and stared at Miss Walker, who blinked nervously at him from the shadow of the little passage.

"Gone!" he said. "That is impossible!"

"You may come in and see for yourself," retorted Miss Walker. "I'm as surprised as you are. She went out early this morning and when she came back she paid me up, and there was Chubb's cab at the door. You could have knocked me down with a feather!"

"But she must have left some address?"

Miss Walker shook her head.

"You can't call London an address. She only said she was going to London."

"But did you not ask her for one in case of letters coming?" demanded Unwin.

"I did. And she said she never knew where she might be." Miss Walker blinked still more, but with emotion this time, and a tear ran down her face. "I feel it, Mr. Unwin. I do, indeed. Her and me have been friends, in a manner of speaking; and now for her to go off like this into the wide world as you may say, and no hopes of seeing her again."

"She may return," said Unwin.

"No. I said, 'When shall we see you again?' and she said, 'I am not coming back to Wendlebury, Miss Walker. This is good-bye!' Then she kissed me, but never a tear she shed. Her eyes were as dry and bright as anything. Still, I do think she felt it too, Mr. Unwin."

"I can't believe it," muttered Unwin, looking down at the pavement.

"Nor I couldn't," said Miss Walker, voluble in her agitation. "But there it is! I suppose with the fortune-telling and all that, she is one of the wandering sort—blowing where she listeth, if you'll forgive me quoting Scripture, not meaning any irreverence. And no doubt she suddenly got the fit on her. She had to go."

"Perhaps that was it," said Unwin, after a pause.

"Never mind!" said Miss Walker. "But you are off to foreign parts yourself, Mr. Unwin, so you and Miss Lambert wouldn't have seen much more of each other anyway." Then she glanced towards the untidy sitting-room and added briskly: "Well! I must just get Mrs. Chubb to come round and clean me up while I am out working today. Somebody else may be coming to look at the lodgings. I must stand a bucket or two of water about to take off the smell of her cigarettes."

Thus was Delia set outside the life of the little place, definitely, as if a deed of banishment had been read over her. As Unwin turned from the door after making his farewell, he saw the narrow, pellucid, chattering stream of existence, so like the beck behind Wendlebury market place, already flowing over the spot where Delia had been.

At first he was only conscious of a feeling of blankness. Why had she gone like that? He simply could not understand it.

Then anger began to stir. She had treated him abominably. Now that she was gone and he could not marry her, he experienced a bitter sense of frustration. He felt for the moment that he ardently desired the marriage now it was placed beyond his reach.

But even as he turned into the market square a blessed sense of relief began to creep over him. The registrar's office was there, facing him, and all that it implied. He felt his heart give a great thud against his ribs, like that of a man who has narrowly escaped a great danger.

Then the Vicar came by, hurrying to matins.

"Sorry to lose you, Unwin. Off next week, I suppose?"

"Yes." Suddenly Unwin made a determination. "No. That is, I find I have to go to-day instead."

"Ah! Always things you want in London at the last moment. Don't forget a solar tope, and insect powder. Hope to see you back well and hearty before long. Good-bye!"

So the Vicar bustled along full of his own business, and Unwin looked at the time. Yes, his heavy baggage was all gone; by using the telephone and working hard, he could be ready to take the three o'clock train.

But behind all the farewells and the thousand small preoccupations of that day, one thought urged like a gnawing toothache at the back of his mind—he was going away without seeing Pauline. He had done with women, and was indeed now shaking the dust of the female kingdom off his feet for ever—but he was going away without seeing Pauline.

At last Chubb's cab stood at the door and it was time to go.

Pauline sat by Aunt Dickson mending stockings—with her pale, pointed face and shadowy hair she sat running the threads in and out, more like a will-o'-the-wisp trained to domestic duties than ever. Her soul had retained from childhood the power of going long secret journeys even while she was working or talking, and perhaps this was one reason for her—not aloofness—but some quality which has no equivalent in words. Those to whom such people speak have a subtle knowledge that the speaker is on such a journey, though there is no indication of it, and they do not know they know. Perhaps a rush of coolness in the mental air. . . . Thus Aunt Dickson felt at times a little repelled by Pauline, though loving her so much.

It was a relief to-day, for instance, when a tinkle of china announced that Eva had returned from an errand

and was bringing in the tea. An onrush of warm, human thoughts came with her. Pauline rose and put a little table near Aunt Dickson, giving her a caress as if unconsciously asking forgiveness for having left her alone so long.

Aunt Dickson looked up with a wistful smile on her big red face. What should she do when Pauline went? And yet, of course, she would marry and go away some time. She thought it strange that the affair with Unwin had altogether stopped, and a delicacy of feeling rare in elderly people's dealings with the young prevented her from asking a direct question, while Pauline evaded indirect remarks on the subject. But here Eva, the outsider—as so often happens—plunged carelessly into the midst of the hidden thoughts of both.

"I've just seen Mr. Unwin," she began excitedly. "I was at the fish shop when he drove in Chubb's cab across the square. People were calling out 'Good-luck' to him, and he was waving back at them—it was a fair treat—like a circus going round or something. It only wanted him to be throwing out little handbills. But he waved and shouted a good 'un, so he did!"

"Then he did not seem to mind leaving Wendlebury?" said Aunt Dickson.

"Not a bit of it," replied Eva; "he was off on the jolly jaunt, he was! And I for one don't blame him. A young man wants to see a bit o' life. I shall ever remember when I cried at coming into placing at Wendlebury—I was only twelve—and my mother says to me, 'Eva,' she says, 'some sticks to one fowl-run till it goes sour, but not us Martins. Stop hollering at once, pack your box.' So I did. And I haven't never regretted it. I dessay Mr. Unwin won't neither."

"I hope not; I'm sure I hope not," said Aunt Dickson, conscious of Pauline's silence.

"Oh, and there's another bit of news," said Eva. "Miss Lambert's gone too!"

"Miss Lambert! You don't mean they have gone together?" cried Aunt Dickson.

There was a pause as Eva put a cake on the table. And into that pause clashed the sudden breaking of the cup which Pauline held. Her tense grasp of it had broken the delicate china.

"Oh, lor! Let me pick up the bits. Accidents will happen, Miss," said Eva.

"Did they go together?" said Pauline.

"No. She went by the first train this morning. I met Mrs. Chubb and she told me Miss Lambert knocked them up before six for a cab. But both him and her went to London. There wouldn't be no law against their meeting in London, of course," concluded Eva, retiring.

"Thousands of people go to London every day who never meet there," said Aunt Dickson, as the door closed.

"Oh, yes," said Pauline, and she began to speak of a knitting pattern which Aunt Dickson wished her to find. But behind the quiet desultory talk an unspoken conversation went on in which both took part without knowing it. Aunt Dickson saying more beautifully than any words could do, how dear Pauline was, and how she would be always loved best and always welcome here, whatever the world might do to her. While Pauline replied in the same way that she knew, and was comforted, so long as the unspoken words did not translate themselves into language.

But aloud she only said—

"I think I'll go out for a walk now. I have been in all day."

And Aunt Dickson answered—

"Do; you want some exercise."

But that unspoken conversation with Aunt Dickson was one which Pauline always remembered very tenderly; more tenderly as the years went on, and she knew how hard it is for experience to keep silence in the face of untried youth.

At this time, however, she was only conscious of a sense

of intense relief as she ran down the clean steps of the little house, leaving it all behind her. And as she tramped along the Ryeford Road, seeing the dissipated scarecrow breast-high in the ripe corn, she thought and feared and wondered until her tired brain refused to conjecture any longer. One fact at least was plain: Unwin had gone away without saying good-bye or trying to see her. He could not have done that if he had not quite finished with her. She had nothing to hope for now. No more listening for the bell or watching from the window. Only a dead certainty that she must live her life as best she might without him.

And in saying that to herself, she realised that in spite of assuming despair she had really always kept full of hope.

Next morning, being Sunday, Pauline stood in the window buttoning her gloves.

"It looks rather like rain," said Aunt Dickson, glancing at Pauline's slim figure in the filmy grey gown. "I don't think I should go to church if I were you!"

"Oh, yes, I think it will keep off until I get back," said Pauline.

But both knew that it was one of Wendlebury's rare days of absolutely settled dry weather, and that Aunt Dickson was advising Pauline to spare herself an ordeal.

"Well, good-bye," said Pauline, hastily breaking one of those pauses in which unspoken things grow too loud. "Don't I look a swell in my new frock?"

"It suits you down to the ground," said Aunt Dickson cheerily. "Good-bye, dear."

So the door banged and she was left alone by the window, while the bells rang out, as always on Sunday morning—

> "Come, you Wendlebury people,
> Come and pray beneath your steeple."

Then, changing the chime—

"Come Wen bur peo
you dle y ple,
"Come and pray be-neath your steeple!"

And lastly—

"Come! Come! Come!"

Aunt Dickson listened to it all through the open window, and watched the churchgoers hurrying past. She smiled at one, waved to another, and at last the street was empty.

She took up the prayer-book and began to read the service; no doubt finding in it that which could soothe and console her active spirit as she sat there, bound by her infirmities.

The service was over, and the congregation emerged into the pleasant flowery greenness of the churchyard. A group formed beside the path consisting of several Wendlebury ladies who were well acquainted. They wore turned silks and pale alpacas that had done duty for many summers, but each gown somehow possessed a delicate freshness which seemed to be unfading, like the scent of lavender. Mrs. Delamere and Pauline alone wore dresses new that year, but Mrs. Delamere's gloves were less fresh than Miss Harriet's, and Pauline's silk stockings were not so fine as Miss Amelia's often mended summer Sunday ones, which had belonged to her mother. Mrs. Carter wore the purple cashmere that all affectionately remembered, while the Vicar's wife had brought forth again the silk which she bought for her sister's wedding—the sister who now possessed a baby able to read.

On the whole there was something very charming about the group—delicate skins, clear, faded eyes—as if the

ladies themselves had been put by very carefully in silver paper. And Pauline harmonised with them well enough, but Mary Carter, coming briskly up the path, seemed a thought too new and strongly coloured. There was a pleasant murmur of greetings.

"So glad to see you out again, Miss Harriet."

"Yes, delightful weather! Mr. Unwin will have a calm passage."

"Oh, he does not actually sail until Wednesday."

So they spoke together in little short phrases, preening themselves in the sunshine.

Then Miss Argle said, speaking with clear precision—

"I hope Mr. Unwin will do well. A nice young fellow, but better away from Wendlebury."

"Why?" demanded Mary Carter abruptly.

"Oh, a new beginning . . . always a good thing," said Miss Argle, rather taken aback.

"He hadn't done anything wrong," said Mary.

"No," agreed Miss Argle apologetically; "but I am afraid his money affairs must have been . . . My people found a pawn ticket when they picked him up. The motor accident, you know?"

"Then they ought to have kept it to themselves," announced Mary Carter. "Least they could do after knocking him down was to keep silence about what he had in his pockets." She turned to Pauline. "Don't you think so, Pauline?"

"Yes," answered Pauline, unable to say more.

"I am sure my relatives are most scrupulously honourable," said Miss Argle, turning very red. "They never meant it to go any further . . . they would never dream . . . I was only showing what a good thing it was that young Unwin had left Wendlebury."

"Only fancy!" said Miss Harriet in her deep tones. "Reduced to pawning his wardrobe! I fear he must have led a sad life before being brought to such straits! How little one knows of what is taking place even within the

narrow radius of one's own social circle. What's that!" For a strange little noise, something resembling the sneeze of a cat, had come from the billowy mass of grey and lavender of which Miss Amelia was the centre.

"Has Mrs. Delamere's Midge escaped and come to meet her?" said the Vicar's wife, stepping quickly aside, for every one hated and feared that pampered canine morsel.

Then the noise came again and it was plainly human.

"Amelia!" thundered Miss Harriet.

"It——" Poor Miss Amelia choked and then went on, turning tragic eyes from one to the other of those astounded faces, "It was *my* pawn ticket!"

"Yours!" gasped Miss Harriet.

"I got Mr. Unwin to pawn some jewelry for me. I was short of money when you were ill. I didn't want to worry you," faltered Miss Amelia.

"And you could think of no better solution than such a one as this," said Miss Harriet, also in her way tragic. "Amelia, I thank heaven our father is not alive to see this day——"

"Oh, I know," said Miss Amelia, wringing her hands in the cleaned lavender-coloured gloves and weeping bitterly. "I *know* I have brought disgrace on the family."

"I wish my tongue had been cut out!" said Miss Argle, also weeping.

Then Pauline stepped forward and put a sheltering arm round the poor trembling Miss Amelia.

"There is nothing to cry about," she said gently. "Why, it was just the most sensible thing you could have done. We should all have done the same if we had only had pluck and initiative enough to think of it."

"No, no. Don't say that! Don't let my example lead you astray. That would be worse than anything," cried the poor trembling lady.

"I won't pawn anything unless I am positively obliged, and then I shall feel I have done right," said Pauline.

"Thank you, dear," said Miss Amelia, but she reflected

with a wistful regret that the dear girl's commercial career had blunted the delicacy of her perceptions in such matters.

There was a pause, and all the ladies looked towards Mrs. Delamere; but defiantly, as it were, daring her to pronounce judgment against Miss Amelia.

She responded by soaring high above Wendlebury.

"Dear Miss Amelia, how quaint of you! I really must tell my brother-in-law, Lord Southwater, when I next stay with him," and she flashed her teeth upon the agitated group.

But at this the worm turned. Miss Amelia had torn up something within herself by the roots in order to make that confession, and she was not going to be called "quaint" as she stood bleeding there.

"I thought your one annual visit to Lord Southwater had already taken place," she said, trembling very much indeed. "Perhaps next year you may have something more interesting to talk about."

The shaft went home. Mrs. Delamere could not say definitely that she had the run of Southwater Park all the year round. But the honours of war remained with her as she replied with great dignity—

"No. No. We always like to talk of the little happenings here. I assure you that we both take the greatest possible interest in Wendlebury."

Then she turned to Miss Argle, who was murmuring apologies, and mopping her eyes, and behaving generally in a manner quite unbecoming a descendant of the ruthless Argles of Argle Towers, and she towed that distressed member of the aristocracy swiftly away with her down the churchyard path.

"Come home, Amelia," commanded Miss Harriet.

But the tone in which she said it caused Mary Carter, who was already filled with indignant sympathy, to state with crude abruptness—

"She shan't go home with you unless you promise not to bully her. So now!"

"Mary!" pleaded her mother.

"My dear!" murmured Miss Amelia, grateful but deeply shocked.

"I don't care!" said Mary; "I can see it in her eye she is going to bully Miss Amelia. And I won't have it!"

"Mary! Mary!" pleaded Mrs. Carter, trembling like a pink-and-white blancmange under her purple gown. "She does not mean to be disrespectful, Miss Harriet. It is only that she is so fond of Miss Amelia."

But here Miss Amelia withdrew herself a little and faced them all, saying surprisingly, but with intense earnestness—

"Now I have had time to think, I never was so relieved in my life. I feel as if I were just coming away from the dentist after having a double tooth extracted; I do indeed. Every time Harriet looked at me, I quivered in a way I can never describe, as if my outside remained stationary while my internal arrangements changed places, if you know what I mean?"

"I do not," said Miss Harriet.

"But it was very kind of Mr. Unwin," maintained Miss Amelia.

"Kind!" trumpeted Miss Harriet. "Do you think my sister would ever have attempted such an escapade without his connivance? It is well that he has sailed for a shore where, I gather, the temptations of a gay town like Wendlebury are absent. I like young Unwin, but that is my opinion." Then she turned to Miss Amelia: "Let us go home to luncheon."

So the little group moved away through the now empty churchyard, Miss Amelia murmuring obstinately that it was all her own idea, and that Unwin had behaved most nobly, and that Harriet could say what she liked. As they passed the yew hedge near the grave of the stranger who had died at the Dragon at Ryeford, the Vicar's wife

endeavoured to clear the mental atmosphere by saying brightly—

"See! Some one has been putting flowers on the stranger's grave. I wonder who it can be!"

"Perhaps the landlady of the Dragon," suggested Mrs. Carter, to whom her husband never told his professional secrets.

"They are ordinary market flowers," said Pauline.

And the ladies stood still again for a moment in the sunshine, looking at the bunch of country flowers which Delia had bought the day before with the dew still on them, as she hurried through the little town to order Chubb's cab. The dew had all dried off now and they had faded, but they still made a patch of colour and sweetness.

"I expect it must be the landlady," repeated Mrs. Carter, breaking that little silence, and they walked on again talking together. But Pauline said nothing because she was feeling so vividly what this stranger's death had meant in her life. The whole scene on that morning outside the Dragon Inn rose before her eyes with extraordinary clearness. It was almost like a vision appearing between her and the faded roses and stocks and southernwood on the grave, leaving them visible without destroying the delicate clearness of that morning scene . . . the pale light on the road . . . Unwin's young figure in evening dress against the doorpost.

Then Mary Carter was speaking—

"Perhaps Mr. Unwin put the flowers there. He used to visit the poor man."

"Oh, he would be too busy," said the Vicar's wife decidedly.

So, still wondering, they tripped along the Sunday streets, going one by one into the straight-fronted houses where tables were spread with fine, beautifully mended damask. Soon tiny joints on blue china dishes made their appearance, followed by such sweets as canary pudding

and cup custard, whose very names seemed redolent of the rich meadows about Wendlebury.

Such a story as that of Miss Amelia and the pawnbroker's shop, however, long outlived any vague surmises about an unknown grave, and it finally reached the august ears of Lord Southwater through those very Argles of Argle Towers who had picked up Unwin and found the pawn ticket. For a moment that excellent peer felt slightly worried, feeling that he had done Unwin some little injustice. But he soon reasoned himself into the comfortable conviction that this visit of Unwin's to the pawnbroker on Miss Amelia's business was neither the first nor last. He saw that he had been right, as usual, in condemning the young man who stepped from under the three balls with such a jaunty, accustomed air. He could not, without greater cause, convict himself of injustice.

CHAPTER XXI

WINTER-TIME

IT was Wednesday night, and Pauline stood in the kitchen heating some milk. Eva, returning from her night out, burst through the doorway with an indignant—

"So that's over!"

Pauline started, the words fitting in so marvellously with her own thoughts at that moment. For she had been experiencing during the past three days such a torture of suspense every time a postman went down the street or a telegraph boy bicycled past, that the present certainty of Unwin having sailed without a word or sign of farewell seemed almost like happiness. All who have experienced intolerable suspense for any cause know that strange happy moment when it stops, even though the next moment may plunge them into the very depths of sorrow.

"If it wasn't for the looks of the thing," continued Eva vehemently, "I would never walk out with anybody again. Only if you don't, the other girls thinks you can't. Mark my words, Miss Pauline, there's more girls goes out with young men because, if they don't, they're frightened of having it thought they can't, than anybody would ever dream of. D'you expect *I* wanted to go gorming about with a bandy-legged chap that couldn't say 'Bo' to a goose? Of course I didn't! But when I had brought myself to it, I nat'rally boiled with rage to come across him walking arm-in-arm with somebody else."

"But what a good thing you did not really care!" said Pauline.

"Oh, yes," replied Eva, rapidly regaining her composure. "It was only just for the minute, as you may say, and because the girl was that little fat lump of a general from across the street that always has holes in her stocking-feet. I didn't like being cut out by her. But what is to be, will be. Some knows how to draw the men on and some doesn't. There's that Miss Lambert now—her as went off with Mr. Unwin—she had the sort of 'Come-on-lad' way with her that makes a man think he's doing all the coming. It's a thing you can't *get;* you must be born with it, and after all you and me has plenty else to be thankful for, Miss Pauline."

"We do not know that Mr. Unwin and Miss Lambert ever even met after they left Wendlebury," said Pauline, ignoring the consolatory reflection.

But she had so often pictured them meeting in every imaginable fashion, during the past three days, that her voice carried no conviction.

"Oh, he'd be after her," said Eva. "She's one of *them* —like that fat general—you don't know why they are, but they are. I shall ever remember a young man that I walked out with once when I was at home on my holidays. We used to get to a place every night where there was some gorse bushes all yellow over and smelling beautiful with the dew. And he used to stop a minute—a fine set-up young feller he was—and he'd say every time: 'Look at them gorse bushes! When gorse is out o' flower, kissing's out o' fashion.' Then he'd go on again. But one night I let my cousin as was spending the week-end with us walk on with him while I went to the shop for Mother. I came up with 'em just at the corner where the gorse bushes was. I never meant to be sly nor nothing, but my feet made no noise on the grass, and I was behind; so I heard him say just as usual: 'When gorse is out o' flower, kissing's out o' fashion.' I must own I didn't much like him saying it to her, too, so I stopped still a

bit, waiting for him to walk on as he always did." Eva paused, and added solemnly: "Miss Pauline, he didn't walk on."

"Um," said Pauline, vaguely, going towards the door.

"He started to, but he catched sight of her standing still and hanging her head down—the puss! Not that I blame her," added Eva generously, "for I should, myself, if I'd ha' thought of it and known how it would act. I liked that young feller. Well, she just hung her head down, and twiddled her pocket-handkerchief, and said, as if she couldn't bring it out, she was so shy: 'Gorse is i' flower *now,* Mr. Peters.' His name being Peters." She paused.

"Well?" said Pauline.

"Oh!" said Eva, clashing the kettle upon the stone. "What do *you* think! They was kissing each other before I could get round the next bush, of course."

"He was not worth having," responded Pauline; "and she was a minx."

"I wouldn't go for to say that," replied Eva philosophically. "It's just that I wasn't one of *them*—she was —and there you have it!"

Pauline again took up the cup of milk and left the kitchen, but the moment of comparative happiness was already over. During the past three days every other feeling had remained in abeyance as she waited, but now that it was of no use waiting any longer, she began to see a future which Unwin and Delia Lambert would share together while she remained outside. Something more than accident must have caused Delia to go to London on the same day as Unwin, after so many weeks in Wendlebury, and something more than the mere pleasure of meeting, otherwise she would scarcely have rushed off in that fashion never to return. There was every evidence of a break-up of old conditions and a fresh start—together. That was how Pauline felt forced to think of them now, so that even her thoughts of Unwin were

spoiled, which is the last affliction of love. It seemed to her as she went down the passage to the sitting-room, that she would have been happy in picturing him alone.

But the next morning, when the letters came, she found by the blankness of her disappointment that she had after all continued to hope without knowing it, and that though she seemed to have done with suspense it still troubled her. As she went along the street to the fishmonger's in order to inspect the silver and pink of the late salmon lest Aunt Dickson should be disappointed, Pauline imagined she was making herself think about the morning's shopping, and the prospect of rain, and the soft pleasantness of the moist air. And that same self-deceiving frame of mind caused her to accept the ridiculous excuse that she must turn down a certain street, and go to a certain shop, because the old watercress man sometimes came that way into Wendlebury and Aunt Dickson liked watercress.

Even when she entered the little shop and stood choosing hairpins, she still managed to impose upon herself this belief. But when the middle-aged spinster behind the counter said feelingly: "Those with the notch are best. Dear! Dear! You'll know what a loss we've had, Miss Westcott!" she blushed at her own want of candour with herself and owned that she had come here to catch if possible a stray word about Unwin.

"Mr. Unwin lodged with you a long time, did he not?" she said, pulling a hairpin out of a packet with her eyes fixed on the "notch." "You must miss him—always so cheerful——"

"Miss him!" said the thin spinster, her nose-end flushing with emotion until the water stood in her pale eyes. "I give you my word, Miss Westcott, it's like it was when our old cat died that we'd had thirteen years—you listened for a mew though you knew no mew wouldn't come —and that's how me and my poor mother that's ill listens for Mr. Unwin's click of the door and him whistling on the stairs." She wiped her eyes. "We did used to put

blame on him for not being more serious, but I've come to think what-you-may-call jolly silliness is as good as them Blue Pills for Bilious Beggars that Mother swears by." Here she began to weep softly, sniffing and dabbing her eyes, and murmuring apologetically: "Please forgive me, Miss Westcott, but seeing you brought it all back so—him and you used to be such friends before he got in with that Miss Lambert—and with Mother upstairs and the shop to look after, I've got a bit run down."

Pauline's heart was filled with a sort of touched laughter as she listened—the sort of laughter which fills the eyes of people not much given to crying—and so these two women, one on either side of the little battered counter, grew nearer to one another in five minutes than seemed at all credible, because of their common love for Unwin. Pauline knew she loved him, but the thin spinster remained quite unaware that he stood for all the romance and glamour which she had started out to seek long ago, in a pigtail and a "dress improver."

"Well!" said Pauline at last, gathering up a number of hairpins in her hand. "I'll take these, please."

Immediately, these were no longer two souls in secret fellowship glorified by love, but two bodies who wished to obliterate the souls' indiscretions.

"And that is all to-day, you think?" said the spinster, bustling to wrap up the hairpins. "Quite pleasant for the time of year. Thank you. *Good*-day!"

"Yes, quite delightful. Good-morning," replied Pauline, and so they parted.

But as she walked home through the pretty, narrow streets, she was struck afresh, not by their charm but by their narrowness. She felt a sudden over-mastering desire to go away into the open world again, and fight for her own living, and feel the winds of life blowing about her. When she reached her own house with its immaculate steps and shining knocker set in a demure row with the other straight-fronted houses on either side, this feeling became

so strong that it rushed her on past Aunt Dickson's smile and beckoning hand at the window, until she was out on the Ryeford Road with the scarecrow's fluttering rags abreast of her.

Then she stood still, staring at the desolate flapping of the ragged coat, at the stick emerging bare and hatless, but without seeing them. Her mind was fixed upon what must be said to Aunt Dickson.

As she paced slowly back again, the clock chimed the hour as it had done when Delamere came back over half the world to listen, and those chimes seemed to her, as they had done to him, the very essence and spirit of Wendlebury and all it stood for. And those very things were what, in her present state of mind, she could not endure. Better any sordid rush of work and struggle and ugly noises than the exquisite little town with its delicate curtain of grey rain and its ring of emerald fields.

She entered the front room so urged by this feeling, and engrossed in her desire to get away, that she did not plan to spare Aunt Dickson; and said without warning—

"Aunt Dickson—you've been so very, very good to me—but I think it is time I turned out again and began to earn my own living."

Pauline's tone said more than her words, and the big old woman turned round, startled, her face growing a deep crimson.

"What's made you suddenly think that? Have I done anything to hurt you?"

"No, no," said Pauline. "You have never done anything but shower kindnesses on me. You know that. It is only——"

"You find it too quiet?"

"Not that, exactly."

Aunt Dickson sighed, then forced herself to smile.

"Don't look so distressed, Pauline. You are young, and it is natural you should want a change. Go, and remember there is always a home here for you to come

back to. Whatever happens, I'm always wanting you. It doesn't make a bad background to life, to know there's somewhere where you are always wanted."

But suspense and sleepless nights and the sorrow of losing love had reduced Pauline to a state of mind and body in which this kindness of Aunt Dickson's was just more than she could bear.

"There's no one—no one in the world——" she faltered, struggling for words, and then went hastily out, fearing to upset the invalid by making a scene.

After she had gone, and there came the final sound of the bedroom door closing, Aunt Dickson put down her knitting and sat quite still for a long time, looking out into the street. The evening news-girl passed and handed the paper in at the window as usual, expectant of the sunshine which fell across her day when Aunt Dickson exchanged with her a jolly greeting—for that was how people came to turn their hearts to Aunt Dickson as daisies turn their faces to the sun—but to-night she was disappointed, and went on her way feeling chilled as if the east wind had suddenly begun to blow and the blue sky were clouded over.

After a while, however, the big old woman ceased to sit huddled in her chair, gave herself a shake and took hold of the telephone receiver, murmuring briskly: "Pauline is so fond of fried sole. I'll ring up and see if I can get a nice sole for supper."

Then came the fishmonger's boy whistling to the door, and he had twopence for cycling in such haste, and there was a conversation with Eva, and before you could turn round the little, silent house was full of pleasant, spluttering sounds and the chink of china being put to warm, and in the kitchen there was a savoury smell of frying, and the clear fragrance of fresh-cut lemons.

So when Pauline descended, tired and apprehensive, she found quite a little banquet spread, with Aunt Dickson

beam ...er delicate golden-brown fillets on a blue dish sur...ued by green parsley and slices of lemon—the very poe...y of ...ating—and Maids of Honour all almonds and soft sweetness from the old shop where Unwin and Pauline had once been served with Lovers' Kisses by the sympathetic owner.

The little meal was cheerful enough because Aunt Dickson belonged to that odd company who find a sort of exhilaration for the moment in boldly facing another blow, while Pauline's overstrung nerves lent themselves to such a gay response that by the end of supper Aunt Dickson was genuinely laughing.

But when Eva came in to clear away she struck a discordant note.

"Not much eaten, for all the laughing and talking."

She spoke in a resentful tone, clashing the plates together, and Aunt Dickson felt bound to say reprovingly—

"You are sorry Miss Pauline is going, Eva?"

"No, I aren't, 'm. She needn't unless she wants to. Us Martins was never ones for sitting down and making a trouble of things as can be mended. We mend 'em, or we don't bother no more about 'em."

The door banged on Eva's retreating apron strings.

"Eva seems put out. Poor girl, she is very fond of you," apologised Aunt Dickson. Then she got out her cards and began to play Patience by the fire while Pauline sat doing some Russian translation at the other end of the room.

For some time neither of them spoke. Every now and then she glanced up to ask if the cards were going well, and Aunt Dickson nodded cheerfully. At last the scratch of the pen ceased and the room was very silent; only the fall of the ashes and the creaking of Aunt Dickson's black silk as she moved in her chair to place the cards. The clock struck nine, making clear, separate sounds which fell and spread on the quiet like rings in a pool. As the final

number fell, some spring seemed to be released in Pauline's mind.

"You have not played Patience for a year," she said. "I wonder what has made you start again?"

But she knew quite well that Aunt Dickson was thus already arming herself for the long, dull evenings of a lonely winter: and the sight touched her far more deeply than any tears or complaining could have done.

"Oh!" said Aunt Dickson, "one gets a fancy for different things. I started jig-saw puzzles, you know." Then, seeing Pauline's troubled face, she added: "Now, you needn't look like that, dear! I am so glad to have had you. It has been such a happy time in my life. But I won't spoil it all by the way I let you go!" She paused. "Old people have got to bear loneliness just as babies have to bear helplessness. It's just part of life. You start out, such a lot of you together, that you can't picture ever being alone. Then if you live long enough they all drop off, one by one. You're left. But you go plodding on."

Pauline gazed at Aunt Dickson's face, unable to realise that she too would one day be feeling the same if she lived long enough.

"How brave all old people must be!" she said at last.

Aunt Dickson shook her head.

"You forget what's in front of you. You're getting very near home."

Then silence again, Aunt Dickson moving the cards and Pauline striving to fix her mind on her work. But between her and that new and enchanted country which every fresh language opens to those who have eyes to see, there came the big red face of Aunt Dickson with its expression of mingled bravery and wistfulness. She rose from the table and went and stood with her hand on Aunt Dickson's shoulder.

"After all, I should like to stay just until the winter is

over if you will have me," she said. "Winter's a bad time for working women."

"You want to stay?" Aunt Dickson's veined hands trembled as they moved over the cards, but she spoke quietly, lightly, just as Pauline had done.

"I'd love to stay if you'll have me—eating my head off!"

They both laughed, not that there was anything to laugh at, but because both were rather inclined to cry, and neither wished to hurt the other by a too great exhibition of feeling. It came as a relief when Eva opened the door and said: "Mrs. Chubb's in the kitchen, 'm. She wants to know if you can do without her next week. Her and Chubb's going by a cheap trip to London."

"Mrs. Chubb! Going to London!" cried Aunt Dickson, shuffling the cards together. "Of course I can do without her. Ask her if she has a handbag. I can lend her a handbag."

And immediately the prospect of the Chubbs in London—the Chubbs seeing St. Paul's—the Chubbs going to the waxworks—so filled Aunt Dickson's mind with pleasant images that she forgot everything else. She was not prevented by Eva's scandalised remonstrances from offering Mrs. Chubb the loan of her best black bonnet and mantle for the occasion.

"I never wear them," she declared. "Why shouldn't Mrs. Chubb?"

"Because she'd get taken up," said Eva tartly. "I hear Londoners aren't as sharp as us Yorkshire folks, but even they could see she'd got on what didn't belong to her."

"Let me see for myself," said Aunt Dickson. "Tell Mrs. Chubb to put them on and come in."

But even she was convinced when the extinguished Mrs. Chubb appeared with her sharp nose-end alone protruding between the feathered mass above and the cloak below and nothing human of her else visible. She was ushered in by Eva who said, between little bursts of cackling laughter: "I don't mean no offence, on'y you'd make a cat

laugh, Mrs. Chubb, you would indeed! Oh, dear! I never knew as a nose-end by itself could look so savage. Do take 'em off or you'll be the death o' me!"

Eventually, of course, Mrs. Chubb took home with her both bonnet and cloak, which were to be altered to her dimensions, and Aunt Dickson went to bed, solacing a long, wakeful night by dreams of the Chubbs doing the thing in style and enjoying themselves tremendously.

After that nothing seemed to happen in the house for a long time but daylight, and dark, and the succession of meals. Pauline worked at her translation, and walked on the Ryeford Road, and decorated the church for Christmas, and then the New Year was there. But through all the sound and happenings of every day Pauline listened for some word of Unwin, and she thought bitterly how soon he seemed to be forgotten. People mentioned him now and then, and Miss Amelia wondered tenderly what he was doing on Christmas Day, poor boy, but for the rest he seemed to have slipped out of mind. Mary Carter talked of nothing but her nursing, and Mrs. Chubb's sole topic of conversation was the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's, which had impressed itself on her memory for ever, down to the last button on the most insignificant murderer.

Then Miss Amelia fluttered in on New Year's Day with a letter from Unwin in her hand and the information that he was engaged on a bar.

"Nothing to do with the law, I fear, my dear," she murmured, leaning towards Aunt Dickson. "But that is how I put it to Mrs. Delamere just now—*the* bar—just changing the article as I have a perfect right to do, and she must just take it or leave it. *I* have no responsibility in the matter." She sighed. "I fear, however, that, as Harriet says, it is only too like poor Mr. Unwin to pick up undesirable connections in a foreign land. It would be so just like him, poor dear, to get a public house to build instead of a nice, respectable bar such as I believe our barristers eat their dinners at when they are in process of training."

"Oh, I believe the public houses are quite palaces out there," said Pauline, smiling. "I expect he has a very paying job and may consider himself lucky."

But within herself she said: "So that is what I have brought all his dreams to! I who love him better than any one in the world." For her love had enabled her to take the focus of another person's mind, which is a rare thing. She saw Unwin's failure and success as it appeared to his own soul—more definitely far than he was conscious of seeing it—and she knew how he had rejoiced to be of the great company that built Rheims Cathedral and York Minster and all those poems in stone which are not the outcome of one mind alone, like poems written in words, but are so much the more dearly human and beautiful for the unknown lives spent on them. Rough comedy in gargoyle and carving, a soaring loveliness like nothing else made with hands in roof and pillar, every sort of man might put his life poem singly there, and find it again as a part of one tender harmony. Unwin's proper work was to be the keeper of all that, himself so at one with those whose work was done, that he could never make a mistake—and she had sent him out to build drinking saloons.

It would have seemed nothing to some women, but Pauline knew the value of a dream, and that which she had been the means of destroying was the dream of Unwin's life.

Perhaps even she did not fully understand what she had done, because only those who have secretly lived for such a dream can know how life changes when it goes.

A little later—or so it seemed, for the monotonous weeks went by so quickly—when the first crocuses were showing in the little prim gardens and the ladies of Wendlebury were beginning to think of the spring cleaning, Pauline met Mrs. Carter in the street and heard another piece of news about Unwin.

"The doctor had a letter yesterday—so sad—Mr. Unwin

seems to be very ill. The sort of fever they get out there; nothing serious, of course," she hastened to add, because Pauline was unable to hide the blanching of her lips. "We are all sorry. Such a nice young fellow," babbled the kind-hearted doctor's wife, anxious to seem as if she had not noticed. "No doubt he will soon be all right. What a delightful day!" And so they parted, Mrs. Carter saying to herself: "Then there was something in it after all!"

Pauline went on down the street, did her shopping, and returned home, saying nothing about Unwin's illness to any one. She felt she could not bear to discuss it in all its bearings with Aunt Dickson. But before long Miss Argle brought the tidings, and was so distressed that she forgot to take away any cakes, though everything was conveniently arranged for her raiding with respectability, as usual.

"That tiresome basket-seller—no, fortune-teller—I knew it was something itinerant! I wonder if she is with him now?"

And Pauline could only silently re-echo a question which had been asking itself in her own mind hundreds of times during the past few hours.

But when Miss Argle had gone, Aunt Dickson sat with her big face puckered into those folds which were her sign of mental disquiet, and she glanced at Pauline as if about to speak, then changed her mind and finally exclaimed—

"I wish I could remember exactly what I said to Miss Argle!"

Pauline started and looked round from the window where she sat sewing.

"What you said about what?"

"Why—about Unwin and the Dragon at Ryeford . . . about Unwin drinking. I can't remember. It is so long ago now."

"Don't worry," said Pauline. "There's no use. We can't do anything now, you know."

Aunt Dickson sighed and resumed her knitting: then

she heard the front door open, and welcomed Eva back from an errand with the sort of pleasure which would seem ridiculous to an outsider who could not know how large the little, thin, long-faced, bright-eyed woman bulked in the life of that quiet household.

"Well, Eva?" she said, eager like a child for stir and news.

"Miss Walker can do your bodice. She was just sitting down to her tea. She gave me a cup on with her. She was in low spirits," said Eva, delivering her budget.

"Has Miss Walker heard any more from that woman—the fortune-teller, you know?" said Aunt Dickson.

"No. That's what she was feeling miserable about, I believe. She thought such a lot of that Miss Lambert, in spite of all. Then off the woman goes, and never a word nor nothing. Miss Walker says she isn't going to get fond of anybody any more. It's no good. They only give you up or go away or something and you have to start all over again with a fresh 'un. She's just going to keep herself to herself and plod on and not bother with friends." Eva rubbed her nose. "I sometimes think that's best way meself, don't you, Miss Pauline?"

"Yes," said Pauline sombrely.

"No!" said Aunt Dickson, rousing herself. "No, Eva, that means your heart's getting old. We must have Miss Walker here to work, and give her hot tea-cakes."

"Queer way to mend wounded affection," said Pauline.

"Rubbish! You can do it with anything—from a bite of apple when you're seven, to a kind word when you're seventy. You only provide the medium—it's God who does the rest."

"Talking of mediums," said Eva in a low tone, "that Miss Lambert left her glass ball behind her that she used to look into when she told fortunes, and Miss Walker didn't care to have it about—you never know—so she buried it in the back garden and read the commandments over it. She feels it's all safe now."

"But if Miss Lambert ever came back!" said Pauline.

"She never will come back," said Eva. "Black people and black ways is more suited to *her*——" She broke off, pursed up her lips tightly and retired, evidently sharing the opinion of Wendlebury that Delia was with Unwin.

CHAPTER XXII

BAD NEWS

MRS. DELAMERE and Lord Southwater walked together through Wendlebury market place, and each time they passed a large plate-glass window the lady glanced aside to view with complacence the impressive picture they made: for the estimable peer was that morning at his best, newly come from an important conference where he had represented in his own person the Churchmen of England, and had been patted on the back by Bishops and even Archbishops—if such a term could be applied to such approval.

It was somewhere near the fishmonger's that the august pair met Pauline, and Mrs. Delamere, who was for passing on with the blank graciousness of a royal salute, felt all those former suspicions endured during that horrible half-hour at his lordship's keyhole return in full force when she saw that gentleman stop short, smile in pleased recognition, and hold out his large white hand to Pauline.

"How do you do? This is a lovely day, though dull. I think you know my sister-in-law, Mrs. Delamere?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Delamere tepidly: then in an urgent attempt to put Pauline at once in her proper place, she added: "Miss Westcott looks after an invalid neighbour . . . invaluable services . . . excellent home . . . fortunate thing for both, I am sure. You no doubt remember her face in connection with that affair of Mr. Unwin, the architect."

"I remember Miss Westcott without the need of any connecting link," said Lord Southwater, with solemn gallantry

—such regretful gallantry as an elderly widower peer, who does not intend to marry again, may feel for a charming young woman. He wished vaguely that it were possible to have such a young lady in the house as a sort of niece or something, and envied Aunt Dickson; but realising the impossibility of such a course he concluded tamely: "I hope to send some flowers, if I may? An invalid always likes flowers."

Mrs. Delamere flushed deeply beneath her sallow skin. Flowers! The old idiot must be mad! And she hastened to provide a distraction by saying bluntly to Pauline—

"I suppose you know Mr. Unwin is dangerously ill? He was carried on board the ship in a dangerous condition and is not expected to reach home alive. Dr. Carter heard this morning."

And this time the intervention was successful, for Pauline faltered out hastily—

"So sorry! Good-morning!" and left the peer and the lady planted before the fishmonger's marble slab.

But when she came out again into the sunny market place, where, it being Market Day, the stalls were already heaped with bunches of primroses, she did not know where to go or what to do. The intolerable pricking restlessness which is sometimes a part of sorrow drove her out along the Ryeford Road and then back again into the crowds of rosy-faced country people. She could not yet go back to Aunt Dickson, telling her little tale of meeting Lord Southwater. She had no desire to confide in kind Miss Amelia, whom she met and passed by with a light word of greeting. At last something within her, deep down, whispered that she wanted hairpins. But the bathos of this was apparent even to herself, and she determined impatiently that hairpins did not matter. How could they, when nothing mattered? Still she found herself nearing the little shop, and standing near the shabby counter, and asking the thin spinster for those with a notch in them. Then—all at once—she acknowledged to herself what had driven

her here. It was the desire to speak with somebody who really loved Unwin—the same feeling which makes us all find a deep joy in talking to the most uninteresting person who has truly loved our beloved dead.

"I'm afraid we have no hairpins to-day," said the shop-woman in a cautious voice. "Is there anything else?"

Then a high, querulous voice sounded from up above, and the woman ran through the shop to the bottom of some steep stairs with a hasty: "Excuse me!" and called: "Yes! Yes!" nervously, in answer to some question unheard. "Everything she wants? Oh! Yes. Black hooks. Size six!"

Then she came back, very flushed and disturbed, to say in a whisper: "My mother worries about the business. I daren't let her know we are out of hairpins, as she would be so upset. But our stock has not been replenished . . . so much support required for an invalid. . . . Mr. Unwin no longer with us. . . ." Her voice trailed into silence, and a big tear fell on the counter.

"Please give me six packets of hooks," said Pauline, in a loud tone. Then she added, also in a whisper: "You've heard how ill he is? They had to carry him on board the steamer."

"Yes. Oh, if he should die! Miss Westcott—I *can't* think of him dead. If you had only seen him, always so full of fun, in that room of ours upstairs. He left some of his books behind. You can come and see them if you like." She wiped her eyes. "Not that they're what you would want to think of him reading if you knew he was nearing his latter end. But I can't believe we're meant to live every day as if it were going to be the last, for all the hymn says, can you, Miss Westcott?"

At this moment, however, another customer came in; so with a hasty: "You go up by yourself. First room on the left," she turned to face again the little burden of her day.

"What's that?" shrilled the old woman through an open door.

"Lady going to look at Mr. Unwin's room," called her daughter from below.

"What's the use? We can't take anybody with me like this," grumbled the old woman.

Then Pauline entered the room and, closing the door very gently, she stood in the middle and looked round. The bookshelf was full of gaily-bound books; the big chair between the window and the fire still bore the dent made by his head, or so it seemed to her. An old pipe lay on the mantelshelf.

On the wall was a snapshot of him with a tennis racket in his hand, laughing at some one near.

She put her head down in the place where his had been, and kissed the shabby leather, all her love and sorrow and desolation sweeping over her in a great flood.

"Maurice! Maurice!" She could not live without him. She could not live without him.

Then she heard the shopwoman's footstep on the stairs and went to the window, pressing her forehead against the cool pane.

"It's a nice room, isn't it?" said the anæmic spinster, panting a little. "I keep it dusted every day, however busy I am. I've a silly feeling that he may want it all of a sudden and come back, though I know he never will. But it isn't what you *know* . . ."

"No," said Pauline, and they rested on that. "Well, I must be going. Thank you for letting me come up."

"There's no need for thanks," said the woman. "The stairs are steep; mind how you tread. I know you were a friend of his."

"Good-morning," said Pauline, going out. Then she could not go so, and paused in the doorway. "You were his friend too."

"Oh, I shouldn't call myself that. I should never have

called myself that," protested the shopwoman, her nose-end flushing pink with emotion.

Thus they parted without saying any more; but a wonderful unspoken conversation had taken place about the sweetness and pain of love.

During the next two or three weeks Pauline often wished to go back to the little shop, but she dared not—some delicacy of the soul caused her to feel that what she got there was taken under false pretences, and was somehow an injury to the woman who did not know how far she was responsible for Unwin's departure.

And, indeed, the theory that hell is remorse for having injured those we love on earth, came often into Pauline's mind in those days; and she realised that if this be the case, hell does not wait for us until we are dead. It starts now.

When Miss Amelia tapped at the window, beckoning Pauline in, and hurried to open the door, murmuring: "Harriet's in there—keep calm—but I had to let you know," she felt as if cold fingers were squeezing her very vitals—for that hell is cold.

"What is it?" she said.

Then Miss Harriet appeared in the room doorway, and said with precision—

"You will no doubt regret to hear that young Mr. Unwin had to be taken off the ship at Teneriffe on his journey home."

Pauline's dry lips would not let a sound pass. She moistened them with her tongue and whispered—

"Dead?"

"No! No!" cried Miss Amelia. "Oh, dear child. . . . No! Only ill."

"Seriously ill. It is feared he may not recover. A bright young life if somewhat irresponsible," and Miss Harriet turned back into the room.

"Dear Pauline," whispered Miss Amelia, putting her

soft old hand on the girl's. "Why, your hand is like ice. Poor child! Poor child!"

Pauline dragged her hand abruptly away.

"Don't! I can't bear it," she said, and hurried out into the street.

"Have an umbrella. It's raining!" called Miss Amelia anxiously from the doorstep.

But Pauline was already half-way down the street. After a while, when she heard Miss Amelia's door close, she slackened speed because the iron railings and straight-fronted houses behind the mist of grey rain seemed to be growing darker and floating away, and she with them. She felt herself going—going. Then with a pang of almost unbelievable agony she came back and found herself clutching an iron railing, while the red-faced landlady of the Bowling Green Inn, grasping her arm on the other side, said reassuringly—

"There! There! It's the spring. You wouldn't think it to look at me now, but I was as white as chalk before I was married and I used to go off once a day reg'ler for a time at the change of the year. You want iron, Miss Westcott. Or getting married does it. On'y we can't all get married."

"I'm all right now," said Pauline, putting her hat straight. "Thank you so much. The spring is a trying time." And she forced a smile, though the street still seemed dim and unsteady and the landlady rather far off.

"There's a lot of sickness about," pursued the landlady. "Always is in spring. Even our Mary Jane seems all nohow—you'll remember our jackdaw, Mary Jane? And then there's poor Mr. Unwin taken ashore somewhere to die, so they say. Ay; they talk so much about spring, but I——" She broke off. "Anyway, it's a pity about Mr. Unwin. People might say what they liked about him, but I tell you one thing, Miss Westcott; if pulling our Mary Jane and roasting her for him to eat would cure him, I'd do it, and I can't say no more than that, can I?"

Then this interview came to a close, but the Vicar, Mrs. Carter, Mary Carter by letter from the London hospital where she was training, Aunt Dickson, Eva, Miss Argle—every one, it seemed, who had known him, took occasion to add to the torment which Pauline was enduring.

The topic overshadowed even the Great Bazaar which was looming ahead, with Lord Southwater to open it and fancy costumes for the stall-holders—or, rather, fancy heads, being powdered hair with black velvet hats, a compromise insisted on by Miss Harriet, who declined abruptly to make a mountebank of herself any lower down. And when Pauline passed the open kitchen door on washing morning, she heard Mrs. Chubb say—

"Fever! It was no fever that young Unwin had. It was that Miss Lambert done him in."

"Mrs. Chubb!" exclaimed Eva, aghast. "You've no call to say a thing like that, even if she is a bad 'un. You could be had up for saying a thing like that."

"I don't care," said Mrs. Chubb, with a sort of forlorn recklessness. "I know what *I* know, and you don't know!"

"Easy enough to say that!" remarked Eva, her eyes a-sparkle with curiosity.

Mrs. Chubb opened and shut her mouth in her fish-like way, hesitated, then closed her lips tightly and said: "That's the last. Where is them clothes-pegs?" So Eva saw that further questioning would be of no avail and consoled herself with the inward comment: "Silly old owl, she doesn't know nothing. What can she know?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. CHUBB

IT was morning at the Chubbs', and the fire burned badly because the sticks were damp. Mr. Chubb growled in his lair above, and Mrs. Chubb started, letting the brush fall. She wore an air of guilt which would have done her no discredit had Mr. Chubb been buried in small pieces beneath the hearthstone.

Then the growl became fiercer—became articulate. "Where's my shaving-water? You can't expect the Wendlebury ladies to fancy me if I haven't shaved."

Mrs. Chubb clutched a post-card from the table, thrust it into her blouse and dashed some hot water from the kettle into a large mug; but she did all as if hunted . . . hunted and yet ready to turn at bay.

"There!" she said; then she added bitterly: "No fear of the ladies not fancying *you*—you mud safe enough let your beard grow."

"Well, you needn't cast that up again me," said Chubb, eyeing himself with approval as he soaped. "It's your living and mine to have the cab go out, isn't it?" Then he turned sharp round. "Whatever do you keep clutching hold of yourself in the front for? I can see you in the glass. Have you got spasms again?"

"No," faltered Mrs. Chubb, going quite green. "It's on'y a flea . . . them chickens next door," she added hastily.

Then she went downstairs, locked herself in the washhouse, and taking out the post-card again from her bosom she stared at the legend there inscribed.

"Meet me at five-twenty train to-morrow, Friday—D. LAMBERT."

No writing on the wall could have been for Mrs. Chubb more fraught with Fate. She saw the letters run together —the D grow toppling and tremendous—and reason fled from its throne, leaving mad, groundless, purposeless jealousy there instead.

Chubb should not have that post-card. No matter if he found out afterwards—no matter if he killed her for it—he should not have that post-card.

She unlocked the wash-house door with hands that shook so that she could scarcely turn the key, ran across the kitchen and threw the offending missive on the fire back.

"What's burning?" sniffed Chubb, for owing to the dull fire the card smouldered.

"A bit o' paper. Nothing," said Mrs. Chubb, tightening her lips.

Immediately after breakfast she put on her hat and went out.

"What are you going for?"

"Tripe," said Mrs. Chubb, knowing his objections would thus be effectually silenced.

But she went nowhere near the tripe shop; half running and half walking, she covered in almost no time the distance between her own house and that of the little dressmaker where Delia had been used to lodge, and hammered so impatiently on the door that Miss Walker emerged red-faced with annoyance, saying, before she could stop herself: "You tiresome little——" Then she broke off. "Oh, I thought it was the milk-boy again. He is in such a hurry."

"So'm I," said Mrs. Chubb grimly, and she gave no further greeting, but marched straight in and sat down because her legs would not support her any longer.

"Whatever's up?" naturally demanded Miss Walker. "I do hope that Chubb——"

"It's nothing to do with Chubb," interposed his wife—and then she could have wept, thinking bitterly how she lied: it had so everything to do with Chubb. "I—" she saw suddenly even in her jealous fury that a sane reason must be given—"I wanted to ask you to lend me a sleeve pattern and I'm pushed for time."

"You seem to be," said Miss Walker. However, she fetched the required pattern and gave it to Mrs. Chubb, who remarked in a most curious tone, without thanking her for her trouble, "You're expecting Miss Lambert to-day!"

"So I am!" cried Miss Walker, greatly surprised. "But how on earth do you know? She only wrote to me this morning saying she wanted to come. And I might have had twenty people lodging here for all she knew—but she was never one to think of a thing like that."

"I heard—by a side-wind," replied Mrs. Chubb. She had known; and yet the confirmation planted a fresh blow.

"Wonderful how you do hear things in Wendlebury," said Miss Walker, ushering her visitor out. "Well, it's lucky I'm not going out to-day. I can get everything nice for her. I suppose you couldn't come in to help for a couple of hours?"

"No. Very sorry," mumbled Mrs. Chubb, hurrying through the door.

"Going out somewhere?"

"Yes."

And here Mrs. Chubb felt she was indeed speaking the truth, though how her proposed outing was to take place she could not imagine at present.

When, however, she reached home and found Chubb at the lane end with the cab, she said to herself that Providence was on her side as against that hussy, and her course became clear.

"Here, lass!" said Chubb—as she knew on sight of him that he would say—"I want you to stand by the cab for a minute while I go across to speak to Miss Argle about

the manure. She wants a load for her garden. Old mare'll stand all right."

"Oh, I know old mare can't never do anything wrong," said Mrs. Chubb, very emotional and overwrought. "If you nobbud thought as much of your wife as you do of——"

But Chubb was already turning the corner, and Mrs. Chubb stood staring at Griselda. After all—could she? Dared she?

Then she remembered the post-card: "Meet me . . . D. LAMBERT." The intimacy of it! The open, wicked brazenness of this creature, whom every one had pictured safe among the heathen Africans where she so properly belonged. No doubt she had let the poor fellow be taken off the ship all by himself and had come flaunting home without him, smoking cigarettes all the way. She gave Chubb cigarettes—some had turned up in his pocket only the other day—he had kept them as keepsakes. A wave of insensate jealousy swept over Mrs. Chubb as she dashed into the house, seized Chubb's overcoat and an old hat which hung in the kitchen, put on the coat, crushed the hat on her head, dashed out of the house again, and scrambled upon the box.

She wrenched her knee in getting up—no matter. It only added sting and vim to the enterprise. She shook the reins, but the mare, noting a difference, refused to move. Then Mrs. Chubb seized the whip, the outraged Griselda felt cut after cut slashing across her sacred shoulders, and the stone pavement echoed to the furious driving of Chubb's cab through the morning quiet of Wendlebury. Little boys ran by the side of it—the newspaper girl stood aghast—Aunt Dickson, early up and gazing from her window, said, "There's Chubb driving like mad: I wonder what has happened?" while the jackdaw in the Bowling Green Inn garden near the end of the town, startled by the clatter, repeated its two phrases over and over again.

Outside the town the wind freshened blowing from the distant wolds, and at a turn of the road Mrs. Chubb's hat

—or, rather, Mr. Chubb's—blew over the hedge and away. But Mrs. Chubb never drew rein for a moment and continued to press on, the cab rocking from side to side, and Griselda lop-lopping in an exhausted canter.

Once, at a cross road, she called out to a labourer: "This way to Southwater Park?" and had to pause because the man was so intrigued by her greyish hair blowing in the wind, and Griselda's attitude of injured exhaustion, and Chubb's coat which engulfed Mrs. Chubb to the nose-end, that he had no reply ready. At last, however, he answered in the affirmative and the mad race started again. School was leaving as she went shouting and whipping and urging the now hopeless Griselda through the village of Southwater. The school-children formed an imp-like procession behind, shouting, yelling, dancing, calling out: "She's off her dot! She's driving to 'Sylum! She's driving to 'Sylum!"

But they fell back, staggered, when she turned into the park gates which the passage of a motor-car had left momentarily open. The bigger boys whispered together to go and tell the p'leece, for she must be one o' them 'ere suffragettes come to blow up Southwater Hall. The lodge-keeper, running out, followed the cab up the drive, gardeners joined the chase, and Griselda, winning by a single length, stood trembling in every limb before the imposing portal just as three immaculate Bracegirdles of Bracegirdle descended from their car.

Lord Southwater, advancing bareheaded down the steps to greet that charming terpsichorean lady whose legs—as as all Wendlebury knew—were as charming as the rest of her, and he stopped silent, seized with dignified amaze at the spectacle before him.

"James!" he commanded; "send that person away."

Mrs. Chubb was off her box in an instant and flung herself into the midst of the majestic group. But once there, she could only open and shut her mouth, fish-like, and say nothing. The onlookers viewed this phenomenon

with silent astonishment. No one—in the face of that wild-haired, wild-eyed desperation—could doubt the urgency of Mrs. Chubb's business there.

"My good woman——" began Lord Southwater, when James, suddenly grown human, said explosively from behind: "It's Chubb's cab!"

"Chubb's cab!" repeated Lord Southwater. "Then who is this?"

"I—I'm the owneress," faltered Mrs. Chubb. "I wanted to speak to your lordship. It's an urgent matter."

"It seems so," commented Mrs. Bracegirdle. "Well, Lord Southwater, you can't refuse to speak to a sort of female John Gilpin, can you? I'm sure I couldn't."

"This is preposterous," said Lord Southwater.

Mrs. Chubb saw her chance disappearing, and the fine ladies and the fine servants again became as nothing to her.

"It's a family matter," she urged. "I'd speak up now before these ladies on'y I'm never one for washing your dirty linen in public."

"I am not aware——" began Lord Southwater again; and then he remembered that brother of his who was probably dead somewhere in Australia, and stopped short; for, after all, he had a soiled family shirt like all the rest.

"Oh, I'll say it now. *I* don't mind!" flung out the desperate Mrs. Chubb. "But have that hussy back in Wendlebury nypnotising people's husbands, and going on as she does, I neither can nor will. Not if I'm to be hung for it."

"Hussy!" said Mrs. Bracegirdle. "This sounds interesting!" Then, as she feared nothing on earth, not even Lord Southwater, she added archly, shaking a long, manicured finger: "Another illusion gone! I always did believe in your—er—rectitude, Lord Southwater."

That peer's large pink face turned a deep tomato red as he said with almost supernatural dignity—

"Pray accompany me to the library, Mrs.—er—Chubb."

Then to his guests: "Perhaps you will kindly excuse me . . . this poor woman . . . I often have strange petitions."

"Mayn't we come too?" said the incorrigible Mrs. Bracegirdle. "The tact and judgment of another woman . . ."

Lord Southwater, pretending not to hear, stalked before Mrs. Chubb across the hall.

"And now," he said, closing the door, "I should be glad to know your errand in as few words as possible."

"I was charing at Miss Walker's. She's a dressmaker in Wendlebury," panted Mrs. Chubb, with her hand on her heart. "She's a very nice lady, Miss Walker is."

"I presume you did not come here to tell me that," said Lord Southwater.

"No—that is—Miss Lambert used to lodge with Miss Walker," pursued Mrs. Chubb, with a wary eye on Lord Southwater, ready to spring at his coat-tails and hold him if necessary, though he fortunately did not know this. "Miss Lambert—her as told fortunes——"

"Ah!" said Lord Southwater. "Has she been stealing anything? I know those vagrants sometimes——"

"Vagrant!" said Mrs. Chubb. "She had my husband driving her out in a cab all afternoon most days in the week. She was a friend of Mr. Unwin's. There was nothing vagrant about her."

"Then what?" began Lord Southwater.

"Your lordship," said Mrs. Chubb, "I haven't come to you for no light matter. She nypotised your brother, Mr. Delamere, I don't doubt, and *he* died. She nypnotised Mr. Unwin, just the same, and he's dying. She part nypotised my Chubb, and now she's coming back to finish him off. And I won't have it. If I'm hung for it, I won't!"

"You speak of my brother," said Lord Southwater, looking startled and uneasy. "What do you mean by that? He has been long away from England."

"May be so," said Mrs. Chubb, drawing in her horns. "I on'y know what happened. And you're a powerful man about here. You got them other queer women turned

out o' that house in Bowling Green Terrace. I want you to stop Miss Lambert from coming back to Wendlebury."

"How do you know Miss Lambert was acquainted with my brother?" said Lord Southwater.

"Oh! Just a chance. I happened to find out," said Mrs. Chubb.

"But how?" persisted Lord Southwater, and the solemn room, the deep, soft carpets, and his lordship's judicial air caused poor Mrs. Chubb to falter out, against all her wiser judgment—

"I read some of Miss Lambert's letters one day when I was doing her room. She left her keys and everything about. She was like that."

Lord Southwater nearly choked with the intolerable indignity of the situation, but he felt forced to demand—

"Did you gather that they were friends?"

"Yes. I must say he wrote a beautiful letter when he was dying. You could see he was fond on her. Though no doubt it was all nypotising. That's why I want you to stop her from coming back."

But though this was the point to which Mrs. Chubb's mind clung, Lord Southwater no longer thought of it.

"Poor Dick! Then he is really gone. Poor Dick!" and it was a minute or two before he added with a sigh: "Then I must see this Miss Lambert."

"See her!" cried Mrs. Chubb, jumping up and spreading out her arms as if he were starting at that moment. "Now, don't you! Don't you! You're a big man, and a lord, but you're a man—if you'll excuse me saying so—all the same. And if she can get at you, she'll nypotise you too. She will, indeed."

"No, no," said Lord Southwater, abstractedly, opening the door and speaking to some one outside.

"You wouldn't have thought it of Chubb," urged Mrs. Chubb, as the door closed again, wringing her hands at her own impotence. "To see him sitting so noble on his box you never *would* think—and yet——"

Lord Southwater opened the door again.

"I have ordered the dog-cart round to take you back," he said. "Your cab will follow when the horse is sufficiently rested. I must beg of you not to mention this matter to any one until I have seen you once more."

"Do you think I want to mention it, sir?" distractedly cried Mrs. Chubb. "I've kep' it to myself all this time. I'll go on keeping it to myself for ever, if you'll only clear her out of Wendlebury."

"I hope I shall be able to arrange that," said Lord Southwater; then he conducted Mrs. Chubb, wild-haired, frightened to death at what she had done, and yet recklessly triumphant, to the waiting dog-cart.

The smart groom eyed his charge with an injured surprise which not even a hereditary training in professional woodenness could conceal. For a long time he sat disdainful, saying nothing, as the dog-cart bowled swiftly along. At last he said: "You seem to have lost your hat!"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Chubb to this self-evident fact, and left it at that.

"Your old mare was about done," he continued. "You must have brought her along in a hurry."

"I did," said Mrs. Chubb.

"Urgent errand, I s'pose?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Chubb.

"Very urgent?" he pursued.

"Very," said Mrs. Chubb.

And so, having thrown aside dignity for nothing, he resumed it again; thus the oddly assorted pair continued their way in silence until the sight of Chubb standing at the cross roads made Mrs. Chubb turn very white, open her mouth, shut it again, and gaze in speechless agony at the groom.

"What's up?" he said.

"That's my husband," she said huskily. "Let me get down."

He pulled up and let her alight. Chubb, meanwhile, with a sort of bellow began to run towards her.

"Seems cross—your old man," said the groom. "No wonder." Then something in Mrs. Chubb's face appealed to the manhood in him. "I'll stop a minute and see he doesn't knock you about, if you like."

"Knock me about!" retorted Mrs. Chubb, throwing up her head; and while her teeth chattered so that she could scarcely articulate, she added: "That's just his way of showing he's pleased to see me. He's the best and kindest and mildest man what ever lived. He wouldn't lay a finger on me to save himself from the gallers!"

The groom eyed the big, red-faced man coming on like a mad bull and muttered doubtfully—

"Well—nothing to be gained by interfering between husband and wife, I s'pose."

And with that he turned round and drove slowly off, looking round every now and then to see what was happening.

"Wha-yer-mean-by-er-er-er-er——" This booming, confused sound came along the white lane and over the just-springing hedgerows.

Mrs. Chubb stood quite still because her legs would not carry her one inch further. She met Chubb's onslaught with the strange quiet of utter desperation.

"The cab had to go to Southwater—in a hurry—you wasn't there—I took it," she said, in a perfectly toneless voice.

"Who fetched it? Why didn't you send for me?" shouted Chubb; but he was rather taken aback by her quietude.

"The cab had to go—in a hurry—I took it," repeated Mrs. Chubb, scarcely moving her lips.

"Like that!" said Chubb, pointing at her dishevelled head. "Oh, you're mad! You're mad! You're like your old aunt that used to think she had a squirrel inside of her

and fed it with nuts." He paused, breathing heavily. "You must be mad. Where's the cab now?"

"They . . ." Mrs. Chubb opened and shut her mouth, making no further sound.

"Gosh!" cried the justly exasperated Chubb; "if this doesn't beat all! She can't even tell me where she's put the cab!"

"They're bringing it—later in the day," said Mrs. Chubb; and she felt a sudden joy sweep over her because whatever happened the cab could not meet Delia by the five o'clock train.

"Well, you've done a pretty thing!" said Chubb. "Miss Walker, the dressmaker, told me to meet Miss Lambert by the five o'clock train, and I've had to order a cab from the Red Lion. Queer her not letting me know. I can't understand it. I should have thought she'd be sure to drop me a card!"

"P'raps it was lost in the post—lots of letters is," said Mrs. Chubb, beginning to tremble again.

"Maybe," said Chubb. "Anyway, I couldn't have met her because of your tomfoolery, so it's all for the best."

And at this Mrs. Chubb began to weep quietly, like a person who has just come forth from some great danger and can scarcely yet believe himself safe.

"Let's go round by the tripe shop," she sobbed, mopping her eyes. "I didn't get none this morning, and I want a bit of something extra good for your supper."

Thus did Mrs. Chubb prepare to lay her evening thank-offering upon love's altar; and as she and Chubb emerged from the shop together after choosing with care the most succulent bits, Chubb said—

"You may walk home by yourself the rest of the way. I can't walk with a woman that hasn't a hat on and looks a regular figure o' fun. I have my place to keep up in Wendlebury. What would any of the ladies say if they was to meet me? I'll go by market place and you go round back way."

"Very well," said Mrs. Chubb. "It's on'y natural, so much thought on as you are. You couldn't do silly things like what I do if you was to try ever so."

"I couldn't," responded Chubb, mollified, however, by his wife's flattery. "I allus had more gumption than most folks. My mother used to tell me that. It would take a clever person to deceive me. So mind never you try it on, or it'll be worse for you."

"N-no," quavered Mrs. Chubb. Then, to her intense relief, Pauline rounded the corner.

"Good day," began Pauline, but realising the distraught and unusual appearance of Mrs. Chubb, she added quickly, "I hope there has not been an accident? What is the matter?"

"Nothing; merely lost her hat," said Chubb, taking on his shoulders the honour of the family. "Any lady might lose her hat! Draught at a street corner. Passing waggon. There it goes!" He turned upon his wife, determined that his words should be true. "That's how yours went, isn't it?"

"Yes; there did seem a strong draught," said Mrs. Chubb, with convincing sincerity, remembering that headlong flight. Then some subtle desire to test Pauline's feeling about Delia made her add, glancing up with her foolish, vacant look: "Chubb's a bit bothered. He thinks Miss Lambert's card has been lost in the post. Miss Lambert's coming back to Wendlebury by the five train!"

"What!" said Pauline, flushing crimson from chin to forehead. "She's in England?"

"She's coming to Wendlebury by the five train," repeated Mrs. Chubb.

And somehow Chubb, though he loomed large and spoke of Miss Walker, was as though he were not there. The real, vital sense of what passed, leapt between Mrs. Chubb and Pauline like the flashing of some electric medium. When it was over, they both knew that the other regarded Delia as the enemy: for they had gone down to the deep

core of things where women are the same. Pauline, however, only said smoothly—

"You will be glad to see Miss Lambert back, Mrs. Chubb. She was such a splendid customer."

And Chubb replied for his wife—

"Yes: not too many of them knocking about, Miss."

But as Pauline turned away her senses steadied from the shock and her whole being suddenly became flooded with light. A new thought shone out across her disturbed soul like the tremendous ray of a lighthouse on a stormy sea.

If Delia were coming back to Wendlebury she could not be with Unwin.

Mrs. Chubb, glancing at that illuminated face, lost all her bearings. With the tripe tightly pressed to her side, she watched Pauline's elastic gait.

Miss Lambert had made a fool of Miss Westcott's young man. She was coming back to Wendlebury. What in the whole sphere of human things was there to look pleased about in such occurrences? Then Chubb gave her a nudge, and said fiercely in her ear—

"What are you stopping at? Get home with you—figger o' fun! If you could nobbud see yourself! I can't think how ever you come to do such a tomfool trick."

And it was not just Mrs. Chubb who answered, it was a thousand generations of Mrs. Chubbs, evading by words æons of Mr. Chubbs with clenched fist—the last kick as it were, of a vanishing attitude in civilised Europe.

"Chubby," she said, gazing at him in simple adoration. "I don't know how it is as I haven't got cleverer with being with you."

"No," said Chubb; "no, nor I don't."

And upon that they parted, taking separate roads home.

As Chubb plodded along he reflected that his wife was a poor, silly thing, and that a man like him ought to have had a clever woman, while all the time his subconscious self was soothed and gratified by the subtle incense which

Mrs. Chubb's inferiority offered to his vanity. When he had eaten the tripe he was in a mood of god-like forgiveness, though he only said—

"There was too much onion with that tripe!"

CHAPTER XXIV

LORD SOUTHWATER IN A SIDE STREET

THE news of Delia's return circulated through Wendlebury with the incredible swiftness of rumour in an Eastern bazaar—that most wonderful gossip shop in the world which has influenced the destiny of nations—where the Power of Gossip becomes, as it were, visible, openly taking its strange and terrible place in the scheme of human life.

Compared with that, the gentle murmurings of the ladies of Wendlebury seem almost ridiculous, but when Miss Amelia came in, half-crying, to say to her sister: "I hear poor young Unwin is dying alone out there. If he had got that post with Lord Southwater this would never have happened," it could be seen that even in little English Wendlebury gossip held the powers of life and death.

"He might have eaten tinned lobster at home and died of ptomaine poisoning," snapped Miss Harriet; not because she thought so, but because she was sorry herself and that always made her irritable.

"And Miss Lambert has come back!—not that I know any real harm of her.—It looks as if she never did run away with him, and we did him such an injustice, and the poor boy dying all alone over there," wept Miss Amelia. "Oh dear! I'll never say anything but nice things about people ever any more so long as I live."

"Then you will no longer be a human being, Amelia," said Miss Harriet, "but an unpleasant machine for the

distillation of artificial honey, and as such to be avoided by all reasonable persons." She paused, and added energetically: "Have you forgotten Mrs. Wareham, who used to call even the pigs pretty dears, for fear she should get out of practice? If you are going to be like that, Amelia, you and I part company."

"But she did it to be popular, not because she thought nice things, and that somehow shone through," said Miss Amelia. "I'm going to *think* nothing but nice things." Then she removed the handkerchief at the sound of passing wheels. "There's Lord Southwater. I wonder how he feels, cocked up there looking as pleased as pleased with himself and thinking everything he does is right because he does it, and Mrs. Delamere showing her teeth like an advertisement for a . . ." She broke off abruptly, putting her hand to her lips. "Oh! how can *you* keep on saying nasty things just after talking as I did? Oh, dear!"

And she went upstairs, overwhelmed by the perplexities of human existence.

But after a while the faded, spacious quiet of her room began to quiet her agitation, and she wished very much that she could do something for Unwin, who had been so good to her, and whom her simple mind pictured alone among heathen strangers, not realising that Teneriffe is a great deal more advanced than Wendlebury, and far away from the equator. Her glance fell upon the sampler worked by her mother with little busy fingers so long ago, and she read for the ten-thousandth time the four lines in black cross-stitch—

"The loss of wealth is much,
The loss of time is more;
The loss of faith is such
As no man can restore."

That reminded her of the only thing she could do for Unwin; so she knelt down by the bed, though it was the middle of the morning, and the action at that unusual hour gave her an odd feeling, like getting dressed in the middle of the night.

But mousey-haired, simple Miss Amelia—with her sensation of doing something cold and queer, and her muddled petitions to her Maker—did yet indeed possess at that moment the greatest treasure of mankind, the loss of which no man can restore or pay for, as those perhaps know best who have once lost it.

Then she put on her coat and hat again, starting to go and see Pauline. But half-way across the room she turned back and took them off once more. Something deep down in her heart—some far echo of that spoilt love of her youth—told her she must do the harder thing and keep away from the girl she desired so ardently to help. She knew that Pauline's sorrow and suspense now was of the order which can only be helped by silence.

Lord Southwater meanwhile deposited Mrs. Delamere at her residence, and in spite of her kind desire to accompany him he made it clear that he had business which he preferred to transact alone. So the landlady of the Bowling Green Inn caught an astonished glimpse of him proceeding majestically on foot past her back premises while she was feeding Mary Jane the jackdaw, and she nearly ended that excellent fowl's career for ever by smothering its second and more profane phrase with her apron.

"Can you direct me to the house of Miss Walker the dressmaker?" said his lordship. "I am not well acquainted with this part of the town."

"I'll come with you, sir," said the woman, darting forth, intensely curious to see what Lord Southwater could possibly want with a dressmaker. "There—that door there—that queer-looking woman has just opened it."

For Delia, in an old blue tea-gown and with disordered

hair, had just stepped out to look for the newsboy.

"Ah! Thank you," said his lordship; and in that moment he thought he knew all there was to know about Delia. "Ahem! May I presume I am speaking to Miss Lambert?" he said, advancing with an air which prevented even the Bowling Green landlady—who was a person of riotous imagination—from thinking that he had come to have his fortune told.

Delia hesitated for a second, looking at him with an odd, whimsical expression which he could not at all understand, but which he felt to be most unbecoming. She even offensively allowed her loose garment to remain unbuttoned at the throat and her hair to stray wildly over her forehead with no nervous attempt whatever to fit herself for the Presence: and it was to Lord Southwater as if she had slapped his large, pink face. He felt once more that poor Dick was a trouble and a disgrace, as he had always been, and the feeble spirit of brotherly sentiment which had animated him on the way there died down. But it was his duty to find out how and when his brother died, and for his own sake he must do his duty. No sacrifice was too great to preserve his colossal self-respect. So he repeated: "Miss Delia Lambert, I believe? Will you allow me to step in for a few moments?"

"Very well," said Delia. "You can come in if you like. Sit down."

But he remained standing before the mantelpiece, one foot a little in advance, gloves in hand. Delia, tall, lean, vivid, but dimmed with untidiness and fatigue, sat opposite to him.

"I have sought this interview with reference to my brother," he said at once, solemnly, being incapable of subtlety; and had Delia never known Delamere, and been the woman Lord Southwater thought her, she could have made capital enough out of that phrase alone as he said it. But she just looked into his honest, self-righteous face and said quietly—

"Yes?"

"A person——" Lord Southwater choked a little, thinking of Mrs. Chubb—even in death Dick brought him into low company. "I am told that you were very friendly with my brother. I noted that he no longer drew his remittance from the bank, but I argued that he might have fallen on good times—made a fortune—one never knows."

"Especially when one doesn't particularly want to know," said Delia, still very quietly, but with her lack-lustre expression quickening.

"You are evidently aware that circumstances divided my brother from his family," said Lord Southwater. "We will leave it at that, if you please. Briefly, my errand is to find out the time and place of his death."

"No," said Delia, "I think not. You don't care. You only want to know because you feel in the wrong position. I am not inclined to betray his confidence in order to ease your mind of that." She began to breathe quickly, her eyes shone, and even through Lord Southwater's outraged annoyance the thought flashed: "She may have been good-looking; it is not so absolutely incomprehensible, after all." Aloud he said, incredulous—

"But you cannot refuse to give this information to *me* —the man's brother?"

"Yes, I can. I can and will," said Delia.

"Then," said Lord Southwater, "it remains only for me to return to my first informant. But I hoped to have spared my brother's memory. That, I assure you, was my only motive."

And Delia, staring at him, began to laugh in spite of her love and sorrow and anger. He seemed so funny to her, standing there, pompously believing what he said.

"Who was your informant?" she asked.

"That I decline to say. I was told in confidence. I never betray a confidence," said Lord Southwater.

"Oh, very well," said Delia. "Only I thought if it

were any one who really did know anything I might give you the information you desire. The less talk there is the better, of course."

Lord Southwater walked to the window, agitated. There was something about this young woman . . . a power . . . After a few moments he came back to the mantelpiece, coughed once more, and acknowledged, with reddened forehead and an overwhelming dignity of demeanour—

"My informant was a woman named Chubb."

"Mrs. Chubb!" cried Delia, jumping up from her seat. "However could *she* . . .? Oh, she is charwoman here and often did my room. I am so careless: she must have read a letter."

Lord Southwater bowed, simply because he could not bring forth any sound with which to intimate that he shared this view, and realised that his information had come through private letters read by a charwoman; but he again felt bitterly that Dick even in death had power to drag him down. At last he was able to articulate—

"I only heard the broad fact of your friendship. I have no idea what was in the letter. I am sure you will realise that all this is as intolerable to me as it ever can be to you."

"I don't doubt that," said Delia slowly. "Well, know the truth, then! He crept home when he was dying, like a sick dog—because it was home and he loved it. And he died at the Dragon at Ryeford, where he could hear the Wendlebury bells and need not bother you."

Lord Southwater's face changed, for no man who is not a brute can hear such a thing of a brother and remain unmoved.

"I would have come," he said. "Dick knew I would come if he sent for me. I am not like that." He paused. "He—— Did he die alone?"

Delia looked at him intently for a minute, then she

shrugged her shoulders. After all, it was not for her to mete out punishment.

"No."

Lord Southwater heaved a sigh of relief, the pink colour came back into his face.

"You were there?" And even to himself it appeared incredible that he should thank God for that.

"No," said Delia. "I was in London."

"Then it was a stranger?"

"Yes." She paused again, a long time, as it seemed, with the clock ticking in that little room, before she continued: "It was Unwin who found him fainting on a stone-heap by the roadside. He went there to see the roofs of Wendlebury. You know how they look with the rain across them. Poor Dick! He was always a sentimentalist!"

But Lord Southwater was in some strange way offended to hear from Delia's lips what he had himself said a thousand times.

"Did Mr. Unwin go again?" he said, frowning.

"Yes. He sat up the last three or four nights. He was there when Dick died. It was the morning after you lectured in Wendlebury. Unwin went just as he was from your lecture, in his dress things, and stayed all night."

"I suppose——" Lord Southwater had to moisten his lips, which had suddenly turned dry. "I suppose Unwin does not know."

"Know what? That the dying stranger at the Dragon Inn was your brother? Oh, yes."

"And yet he never said a word. I—I inflicted on him a very great disappointment, and yet he never said a word."

"He'd promised not to," said Delia. "You don't think your appointment would tempt him to make capital out of a secret he had promised a dying man to keep, do you?"

"No." Lord Southwater cast his mind back to his first impression of Unwin before it had been spoilt and blurred by Mrs. Delamere's story of the young rake coming out of the Dragon Inn. Then he thought of the pawnshop and Miss Amelia, and his never quite allayed sense of uneasiness on that score prepared him to say now: "I have done Mr. Unwin a great injustice. I will ask his pardon. I will make everything all right."

Delia shook her head sadly.

"That's beyond even your power, Lord Southwater."

He looked at her, startled at last.

"What! He's not . . .?"

"He's dying at Teneriffe."

Lord Southwater said nothing, only began to walk towards the door; and for the first time in his life he walked like an old man. But it was not grief for his brother nor for Unwin which had broken him up: it was for himself, that he had been unjust. He, whose religion it was to be just, who had clothed himself with justice as with a toga, felt as if everything in the world had been taken from him, and he were being forced out naked into Bowling Green Terrace.

At the door he paused, brushing his trembling hand across his forehead.

"What doctor attended him? Did Carter?"

"Yes."

"Then Carter knows too! It was very wrong of him to allow me to remain in ignorance."

"He is hardly the man, I should say, to betray a professional secret which was solemnly entrusted to him," said Delia.

"No, I suppose not," said Lord Southwater; for besides thinking himself a just person, he was one. "No, one could not expect him to do that." He paused again, like a man who has lost his bearings. "But you had no idea that I—that Mrs. Chubb——" He really was un-

able to finish his sentence. "What made you come to Wendlebury just at this juncture?"

"Oh! I was walking past the Square garden," said Delia casually, "a grimy Bloomsbury sort of square, you know; and it began to rain, slanting across the trees. So I thought of Wendlebury in the spring. And I came."

"Indeed!" replied Lord Southwater, obviously disbelieving her, though she spoke the simple truth; and he went away.

Delia watched him go down the street recovering his lost dignity with every yard which divided them, and she thought how incredible it seemed that this was the brother of the man she loved. She could not picture them laughing and playing together, and yet they must have done. . . . After he had turned the corner she went in and made a hasty toilette. She felt a sudden, irresistible desire to put some primroses on Dick Delamere's nameless grave, so that he should not seem outlawed and forgotten.

As she was standing by a long table heaped with bunches of primroses from the green lanes and woods round Wendlebury, she looked across to see Pauline bending over them, the pale yellow reflected most delicately on the fine, pale skin of the girl's face.

She waited, not knowing whether to bow or not, and soon noted that Pauline was trying to say something. At last the words came.

"Miss Lambert, can you tell me how Mr. Unwin is?"

"I had a letter from his nurse ten days ago. She said he was very ill," said Delia, gravely and directly.

"And you have not heard since?"

"No; I have not heard since."

"Thank you. It is very kind of you to tell me. Good-morning," said Pauline, going away without her primroses.

Her delicate reserve and pride were all broken down

now by her love; she would have knelt to Delia in the open market place if she could have got by it any news of Unwin. But there was no news, and she returned home to live out another interminable day.

The next evening, as she sat sewing while Aunt Dickson played Patience—for the old lady had never relinquished that game again, feeling it was something she must hold on to in case it was wanted—there came a great noise of talking and giggling outside in the quiet street, and immediately Eva stood in the room, almost as if she had been propelled up a flight of stone steps and through two wooden doors by the Hands of Fate.

"If I don't do it now I never shall," she panted, breathless: "I give you notice that—I'm going to get married."

"Oh, Eva!" said Aunt Dickson, and her lip began to tremble: then she straightened her huge bulk in her chair and added bravely: "Don't think for one moment that I begrudge you a home of your own; I'm very glad. It was just the suddenness . . ." But here the memory of all those faithful years of service swept over her, and she could only hold out her big, soft hand, enveloping Eva's hard fingers in a close pressure, while she murmured, gulping down the rising tears: "You may count on me for the bedroom suite."

"Bedroom suite?" said Eva. "Thanking you all the same, but the house is crammed with furniture. You know that, 'm!"

"What house? Who is he? Oh, I do hope you will be happy," said Pauline.

"Why, this house, Miss, of course," said Eva. "You don't think I'm going to leave Mrs. Dickson! Why, I mainly took to him, though he has a lump on his nose and ginger hair, which I hate, because he's neither a smoker nor drinker, and works every day from eight to eight, and has a light tread and isn't a bad snorer."

"But how do you know that?" said Aunt Dickson, smiling through her tears.

"I asked him," said Eva simply; and Pauline, even in the midst of all her misery, had to laugh too.

"But you do care for him? He is nice?" she asked. "Dear Eva, you ought to have a good husband."

"Oh, he's right enough," said Eva. "Not what I fancied I was going to get when I was a lass of seventeen, but you and me knows, Miss Pauline, that isn't often to be had. Us Martins was always ones for making the best of things, though, and as Mother used to say when our Ben wanted pork-pie—he was a nailer for pork-pie—'You go and scratch pig's back and think about next pig-killing.' Ay; I owe a lot to my poor mother!"

"Well," said Aunt Dickson, "you rather take my breath away, but I suppose if he is a quiet, respectable man the arrangement ought to be quite satisfactory. What do you think, Pauline?"

"I think it all depends whether Eva is really fond of him," said Pauline.

Eva pleated her handkerchief, seeking words, a thing she seldom had to do.

"It's in this way," she said. "When you get a bit on in life, you want somebody of your own that you don't share out. Other people's husbands, even if they're your own brothers and uncles, is only like borrowed umbrellas—they keep the rain off, but you have to treat 'em so careful, and give 'em back, and say 'Thank you'—if you know what I mean?" She paused. "You'll never remember Jum's in the house, 'm, but when there's a burglar, or a mouse, or the doctor wants fetching in the night."

"I must think it over," said her mistress.

But Eva felt quite sure that the matter was really settled, and she was right, for Aunt Dickson spent the rest of the evening very happily in making plans for the newly married couple, even arranging for the accommo-

dation in the back premises of a numerous family, should such a contingency arise.

So another week passed by with no further news of Unwin, and Pauline went about her business with pale lips and dark rings under her eyes, unable to feel the keen interest in Eva's affairs which Aunt Dickson demanded. Then, on the following market day, a thrilling piece of news again ran through Wendlebury. Everybody spoke to everybody else about it in the street, in shops, even in church—where Miss Amelia whispered it to Miss Argle behind her glove at daily Matins.

"Have you seen? A new gravestone outside? Where we thought a stranger called Johnson . . .? Well! it's Richard Delamere!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Argle, so loudly that the curate coughed, rising to begin.

Then the two ladies had to keep silence, because when there are only seven people in a church the most urgent conversation must be left in abeyance. But the moment service was over they hurried down the churchyard, and stood by the gleaming new marble stone which Lord Southwater's wealth had allowed to be so speedily erected. He was in a great hurry to feel that he had done justice to his erring brother.

"How beautiful!" sighed Miss Amelia. "'In our Father's house are many mansions.' So appropriate! No doubt happier for both, even when reconciled: such a difference of temperament. I often find that text a comfort . . . people you feel you could not get on with, even in heaven . . . don't you?"

But Miss Argle had naturally failed to follow the vague windings of Miss Amelia's mind, and said musingly—

"I wonder what made Richard Delamere come back? His poor mother worshipped him, and died broken-hearted; but perhaps it was the thought of her that drew him back when his time came."

"I expect it was that. Poor fellow . . . just coming

back to die and bothering nobody. How touching and beautiful!" said Miss Amelia, wiping her eyes.

So Dick Delamere, incorrigible sentimentalist, lay in Wendlebury churchyard, with his memory gilded by the light he loved—but the other side of him would have mocked at the expensive tombstone.

CHAPTER XXV

THE GREAT BAZAAR

THE ladies of Wendlebury were all assembled in the large hall where the greatest bazaar in the history of the county was to take place. Bracegirdles, Argles, and the like would be as common on the day as rabbits in harvest time; meanwhile the town ladies did that work which remains unseen, and quarrelled pleasantly over the situation of the various stalls. Mrs. Chubb was present to sweep and dust. Every now and then some one would say—

"I wonder what has got Mrs. Delamere?"

And despite a certain pride which all Wendlebury took in its most aristocratic inhabitant, Miss Harriet's caustic: "I expect she's waiting for her peers," found an echo in every breast, even in that of the gentle Miss Amelia.

At last, however, there was a clash of an opening door, a sound of hurrying footsteps, and Mrs. Delamere was in the midst of them, presenting such a spectacle as no Wendlebury lady could look on unmoved.

"Water! A seat!" she gasped, sinking upon an upturned packing-case. "Oh! that I should have lived to see this day!"

"What! what! Give her air! No, not *that!* That's the glue—she said water. Oh, here is Pauline with the water." So spoke all the ladies at once.

"Ah!" Mrs. Delamere groaned, and sipped.

"Do tell us what happened, dear Mrs. Delamere," said the Vicar's wife. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Not bodily," said Mrs. Delamere, and groaned again.

"Take another sip," urged Miss Harriet, aching with curiosity.

"My brother-in-law, Lord Southwater," began Mrs. Delamere—and how differently the familiar phrase sounded now!—"my brother-in-law, Lord Southwater . . . Oh!" she wailed, breaking off. "Useless to hide the truth when he did it before the stationmaster and the entire platform! I was changing a book at Smith's bookstall. I was an eye-witness, though only at the last."

"But what has he done?" cried Miss Argle, shaking Mrs. Delamere's shoulder. "Tell us what he has done."

The others withdrew a very little—though not nearly beyond earshot—because the Argles had been sheeplifting when the Delameres were doing something of the same sort in the Golden Past, so these descendants were naturally of a class, and thus nearer to each other than the rest.

"Henrietta," said Mrs. Delamere, "my brother-in-law Lord Southwater, has gone to London with that Miss Lambert! I just caught a glimpse of him handing her into a first-class carriage. He followed. The whistle blew. I ran out on to the platform, ordering the guard to stop at once. But I was too late. The train was already in motion, and that disreputable person, in a crimson hat, simply hung out of the carriage window and—and——"

"And what?" murmured Mary Carter, who was young and unable to restrain herself.

"It seems incredible in a decent world," said Mrs. Delamere in a low voice. "My brother-in-law was opening a bag with his back turned, and she took the opportunity to—to—to spread forth her fingers and make what is called a long nose at me." She paused at an odd sound. "What's that?"

"Only me choking. . . . My throat. . . . Always is tiresome when you first start your training as hospital nurse," explained Mary.

"But you don't—you don't think they've eloped?" gasped Miss Argle.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Delamere. "I fear so. It looked like it. Oh, if my late dear husband were alive! But I am thankful he has been spared this!"

"Whatever could make him do it?" said Miss Amelia.

And it was then that Mrs. Chubb emerged from the back of the group with a brush in one hand and a duster in the other, wearing the fixed expression of a sleep-walker.

"I know!" she said. "Poor feller; you don't want to blame him—he can't help it!"

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Delamere, sitting up straight on her packing-case and glaring at Mrs. Chubb.

Mrs. Chubb opened and shut her mouth, staring round at them all; at last she said—

"That Miss Lambert, she nypnotised poor Mr. Delamere —not your husband, Mrs. Delamere, but Mr. Richard— and he died. Then she nypnotised young Mr. Unwin and got him away from Miss Pauline here, and *he's* dying—so they say. Then she nypnotised my Chubb so's he won't have a word said ag'in her, and would take her out driving for nothing, I do believe. Now it's Lord Southwater. She did ought to be shut up. Mark my words, she'd nypnotise an Archbishop if she could get at him."

"Hush! Hush!" murmured the Vicar's wife.

Then the door opened again and a groom in the Southwater livery entered.

"Mrs. Delamere here?" he asked.

A sort of electric current passed through the assembly: this was drama; this was life!

"A note from his lordship. No answer," said the man, and prepared to retire; but Mrs. Delamere rose majestically from her box to exhibit her sway over the minions of her kinsman's household.

"Stop!" she commanded. "I may require you. Did his lordship give this to you himself?"

And the man, who hated Mrs. Delamere, replied woodenly—

"Yes, ma'am, just before he went to pick up Miss Lambert."

"You may wait in the vestibule," said Mrs. Delamere rather faintly. Then she opened her letter, and the ladies of Wendlebury tried in vain to look the other way while she perused it. But the remarkable and violent alteration of expression which her face underwent conquered even their ladylike feint of curiosity, and in the end they were all, including Mrs. Chubb, goggling frankly upon her, practically asking: "What does he say?"

"It's not," said Mrs. Delamere, pressing her hand upon her surcharged heart—"it's not an elopement, but an errand of mercy!"

"I'm very glad to hear it," said Miss Harriet, and all the other ladies thought they thought the same; but there was an undeniable feeling of anti-climax as the Vicar's wife added: "Dear Lord Southwater is always so charitable!" and waited for the next item.

"It appears that this—er—Miss Lambert is a chosen friend of Mr. Unwin. Let me see exactly what Lord Southwater——" And in that pause Pauline gazed at Mrs. Delamere with an intensity that Miss Amelia could not help noticing. "Oh, yes, young Unwin is better and is being sent home on board ship. They are going to meet the invalid at the docks. My brother-in-law, Lord Southwater"—the familiar roll was already back again—"is always an Angel of Goodness."

"But that wouldn't make him want to take Miss Lambert to meet Mr. Unwin, would it?" said Miss Amelia, greatly troubled by the look on Pauline's face.

"Unless they were engaged and Lord Southwater had got to know of it," suggested the Vicar's wife.

"But even then——" said Mary Carter. "Lord Southwater is all that is good and kind, of course, but he is not my idea of an amateur Cupid."

"Mary!" exclaimed her mother; then, apologetically, to the other ladies: "This comes of studying in hospitals; girls get so off-hand!"

"My brother-in-law," continued Mrs. Delamere, "will no doubt confide in me immediately on his return—though I may not be permitted to pass on my information. We have family conclaves which we are obliged to restrict to ourselves, of course. You must not be disappointed if you hear nothing further from me."

"Oh, no," faltered Miss Amelia. "Of course not!"

"But I must say, at present, I can make neither head nor tail of it," said Miss Argle.

"The affair certainly passes my comprehension," acknowledged Miss Harriet.

Then came a faint murmur from Mrs. Chubb at the back: "Nypnotised!"

Pauline moved away from the group, saying hastily as she went—

"I'll go and get the pins. We are wanting some more."

"Oh! We have plenty," cried Mary Carter.

But Pauline was already through the door and running breathlessly across the market place. She never stopped once until she reached the little shop where Unwin had once lodged. Then, for a moment, she was too much out of breath to speak, so that the thin shop-woman had begun a mechanical "And what can we . . ." before she was able to gasp out: "He is not going to die. He's better! He's coming home!"

"Thank God!" said the shopwoman. "And you ran like this to tell me! Oh, Miss Westcott!" Then she swallowed, her nose-end growing deeply pink, and yet neither noticed that Unwin's name had not been mentioned. "But are you sure it's true?"

"Lord Southwater and Miss Lambert have gone to fetch him from the boat," answered Pauline.

"Well, I don't care how he comes, or who fetches him,

so long as he comes back safe and well. Do you, Miss Westcott?"

"No," said Pauline, and, indeed, for the moment her relief was so intense—like the strange joy of a man who thinks he has committed a murder and finds himself innocent—that she did not care about anything else.

But before even the pins were bought, she began to see through that dazzling joy to the certainty that Unwin and Delia were lovers. She knew as she walked out—and felt humbled by the knowledge—that her love was not so selfless and beautiful as the love of that tall, thin woman with a red nose behind the counter. And she saw, also, dimly, that the dull world was crowded with unsuspected beauty: there was no real need for escape from any place when you could find the most delicate romance in a little draper's shop in Wendlebury.

As she re-entered the Bazaar Hall, there was a hum of excited voices which ceased when she appeared, and then began again, talking about something quite different.

"This art muslin for my stall is such a charming shade. Where are the scissors? I do hope, Amelia, you have not forgotten the string."

Thus the ladies of Wendlebury, until Pauline was in the midst of them, and then the Vicar's wife said with a sort of artificial surprise—

"Oh, here you are back again! Did you get really strong pins?"

So Pauline saw they knew everything, but were sparing her feelings. And when she suggested that it was time to return to Aunt Dickson they all said: "Oh, *must* you?" regretfully, but with the air of jumping dogs about to be unchained.

Two days later, the bazaar took place. The hall was packed with people at a shilling a head. Palpitating stall-holders, wearing powdered hair and black velvet hats,

stood by their wares awaiting the arrival of Lord Southwater, who was to perform the opening ceremony. The waitresses wore the velvet hats without the powder, and hovered near the entrance to the long tea-room, while Mrs. Delamere could be heard screeching above the discreet tumult to Mrs. Bracegirdle: "My brother-in-law—Lord Southwater—is sure to be punctual; he is the Essence of Punctuality."

Then the big doors were held aside on either side by the bazaar stewards. "Here he is!" sounded through the forest of plumed hats, like a wind in Ryeford woods heralding the sunrise, and Lord Southwater entered, accompanied by Miss Delia Lambert and Mr. Maurice Unwin.

There was one instant's silence; then a strange, rushing sound of everybody whispering urgently and excitedly to the next person. Pauline drew a little further behind the group of waitresses where she could see without being seen. And it is not too much to say that she endured then, beneath her pretty feathered hat, among that group of laughing girls, the supreme agony of her life. She felt quite certain that she was then saying "Good-bye" to love in this world.

"Unwin looks thin and ill, but Miss Lambert looks flourishing. I always thought she was plain before," said Mary Carter.

"Happiness is a great beautifier," said another girl. "That Miss Lambert looks so awfully well, somehow: in for anything."

"Now they're speaking to Miss Amelia," said Mary Carter. "Oh, dear! I do wish I could hear what they are saying."

But, indeed, it was only a desultory conversation about Unwin's health, in which he took part absently, glancing about him all the time in a restless fashion that made poor Miss Amelia quite nervous.

"Poor young man, evidently shattered," murmured Miss Amelia, as he moved away. The little lady felt drawn

to Delia in spite of herself, because they were so alike in possessing a deep disinterestedness—a rare, non-grabbing attitude towards their fellow-men. "Are you making a long stay in Wendlebury?" she asked politely, quite unaware of this bond between them.

"No," said Delia. "I'm going for a splendid holiday. Old aunt fallen in, you know."

"Aunt fallen in?" said Miss Amelia, roused to startled attention.

"Yes; her money, you know, which she had no power to leave away from me, or she would have done," Delia explained. "So I'm off to the South Sea Islands. I've always longed to be in a place where even the fish are scarlet and gold. Such a real change after grey England."

"Delightful for your honeymoon, of course—cheerful colours most appropriate," began Miss Amelia, when she saw Lord Southwater advance to the edge of the platform.

"Ahem!" coughed he.

"Hush!" said everybody.

Then followed a short speech, exactly like all others made by important persons on such occasions, but not delivered quite in Lord Southwater's usual style. It might almost be imagined—if such a thing were possible of such a man in face of a Wendlebury audience—that he was nervous. And when he had finished, and every one had clapped decorously, he did not either sit down or go away. He stayed where he was, twirling his eyeglass, and turning red about the forehead.

"Ahem!" he coughed again. "May I detain you for a moment to—er—embrace the opportunity of congratulating your fellow townsman, Mr. Unwin, on his recovery and safe return?" Absolute stillness fell. It was possible, literally, to hear a hairpin drop, because Miss Amelia heard one of her own do so, and was covered with confusion. "On my own behalf," continued Lord Southwater, "I am deeply grateful to Mr. Unwin that he has, after very great

persuasion, consented to accept the post I have offered him. I trust you will all join me in hoping that we may spend many useful and happy years together."

"Hear! Hear!" said Mrs. Delamere in a very loud tone, determined to show that she was in the movement. "I support his lordship with all my heart." And she so flashed her teeth upon everybody that there seemed to be a perfect illumination in that part of the room.

Then the Wendlebury people surged round Unwin, congratulating and shaking hands, very glad to be at liberty to like him again as much as they wished, while Lord Southwater stepped down from the platform with all his usual pompous dignity. He had done justice to Unwin, and could again regard himself as a just man; more so than ever, seeing what he had done and endured in order to remain just.

But a little later, when he wished to set the seal of public favour on Unwin, he found that the heat had caused the invalid to retire.

Unwin came running out of the hall, called to Chubb, who waited for a fare, and jumped into the cab, shouting excitedly—

"Drive hell for leather down the Ryeford Road. Give Griselda her head for once. A pound, if she beats the record!"

"Sir!" said Chubb. But he immediately drove on, feeling a deep sense of comfort—that joy of the middle-aged in finding things the same—for here was Unwin, gone to heathen parts and nearly dead, and yet come back as flighty as ever.

But after passing Aunt Dickson's—dear Aunt Dickson, who sat jollily watching the world go by to the bazaar, with a wave of the hand for every one—Chubb turned to make a polite remark.

"Did you——" And he paused. "Gee up! Did you offens hear 'em play the banjo?"

"Who?" asked Unwin. "I say, do get on!"

"Why, them niggers," began Chubb.

"Stop!" cried Unwin. "No, go on till you catch Miss Westcott up."

"Clop! Clop!" echoed Griselda's hoofs on the road as if she were mutely marking time and begging him to think again.

"Wo-ah!" called Chubb.

Pauline heard these sounds and glanced over her shoulder. She drifted a few steps towards them, then wavered, hesitating; until that foolish shyness or reserve of hers seized her and—without sense, without reason—she began to run away along the green edge of the lane. Her footsteps made no sound on the damp grass, which pearled her shoes with moisture. Heavy drops from overhanging shrubs and bramble bushes fell on her dress and on her hair. She could hear Unwin's flying footsteps behind her, and the heavy "Clop! Clop!" of Griselda's hoofs behind, but she could neither pause nor turn. That something deep, instinctive, stronger than herself which had made her escape from the bazaar caused her to still run on.

At last she was spent. Her head swam. Her breath failed. She had to lean, panting, with wide eyes, against a birch tree. Its silver bark gleamed softly behind her, the little, delicate branches whispered above, dropping more pearls of moisture upon her. She tried to move a step, but could not. Then she closed her eyes.

"Pauline!" she heard Unwin say lightly, though his voice sounded hot and eager. "You must have been training for the Ladies' Running Championship since I was away."

It was so different from anything she had expected him to say that she opened her eyes and her head ceased to swim. She put out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Unwin? I—I hope you had a pleasant voyage. Are you better?"

"Not yet," he said, keeping her hand. "I saw you leave the bazaar. I guessed you would come up here."

"Did you?" she said, just glancing at him. But in that brief glance she had seen how lined his face was—the face of a man, not a boy any longer—though his eyes were just the same.

He put his hand under her chin.

"Look me straight in the face, Pauline," he said, very gently.

She looked, and he could see her shy spirit peering out at him.

"Pauline!" he said.

"Yes?"

And he could see her spirit ready to dart away into loneliness for the rest of her life. He had to reach that and hold it before he held her dear body in his arms. He was ready—as ever—to risk the half to possess the whole.

"Will you take me on trust? Do you want me, Pauline?"

It was only a moment, but his world seemed to have been hanging in the balance for an age by the time she replied—

"Oh, how I've wanted you!"

It was a little while before they began to realise that they were still on the plain earth under an ordinary sky that held a great deal of rain-water. And when Pauline said: "Where's Chubb? It's starting to rain," Unwin only kissed the wet splash on her cheek and they once more forgot the weather.

At last, however, they were obliged to walk back towards the cab.

"I think we will have it closed—Miss Westcott's dress——" murmured Unwin; and even Griselda winked.

Then the cab rumbled slowly now along the familiar road, and Chubb's fares could see the grey rain drifting

like a curtain across the high spire and the red roofs of Wendlebury. At last, round the edge of the cab a round red face like a great sun came into their field of vision. Chubb hung precariously from his box and they heard, even through their blissful preoccupation, a sound like nothing else on earth but Chubb chuckling.

"Ho! Ho!" he went, rolling in his seat. "You remember my joke, Mr. Unwin? The joke I made when you stole my cab? It'll do again. Ho! Ho! It'll do again. Caught her on the Ryeford Road!"

Griselda whinnied, throwing up her head and heels in admiration, and no words could say more ecstatically: "*My* Chubb!"

THE END

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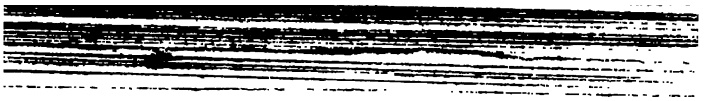

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